

VCS Alumni Insights: Career Paths & Advice, Dr. Kerry Szymanski (VCS '89) - The Power of Personal Networking

Personal networking at industry and peer events can be incredibly valuable for both personal and professional growth, helping to build stronger relationships. Face-to-face connections often foster deeper trust and rapport than virtual interactions, and people are more likely to support, recommend, or refer someone they know in person.

VCS Alum Dr. Kerry Szymanski is an established leader in coaching and mentoring, known for building partnerships across government, nonprofit, and academia. I connected with Kerry on LinkedIn in 2019, and her posts often showcase her master-class-level expertise in personal networking.

I recently met with Kerry at Finger Lakes Coffee to learn more about her strategy and experiences. Kerry confirmed that networking is a wonderful way to expand your circle and connect with your local community. After meeting many interesting people in Fort Lauderdale who worked in many different industries, such as higher education, small business, real estate, and yachting, she started a group called Social Circle to bring people together to socialize and network. It provided an ideal forum for neighbors to meet neighbors and grow business opportunities with clients.

Regular networking offers an opportunity to strengthen social and communication skills. This includes listening, engaging with a variety of personalities, and honing your elevator pitch to build confidence in speaking about your work or expertise. Kerry agrees and often shares her knowledge with her students. “When I was a professor at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, I incorporated experiential learning by bringing students to a networking event and coaching them through the process.” In another example, Kerry shared that attending with a friend can be a good confidence strategy, but cautions that one should set a goal to meet new people. When teaching professional development at a networking event, she would bring her students and assign homework to collect 10 business cards. “If you get 10, you get an A, 8, you get a B, so they were very motivated.”

Kerry offers advice to participants new to networking or returning after a break, sharing the phrase “fake it till you make it.” If you attend an event and don't feel confident, she reassures you that no one in the room knows you're hesitant. Attending consistently helps you become known in your industry or local community. When people know your face and your work, they're more likely to think of you when opportunities arise. Attending an event lets you listen to others' journeys and share your own. Kerry highlights, “You might meet a new friend, a business client, the future love of your life. So, there are so many great opportunities with networking.”

Kerry offers an icebreaker and conversation strategy designed to help people build new relationships that increase visibility and strengthen their personal brand. She calls it the “Rolodex of conversation,” a way to keep a mental list of approachable topics and questions that encourage meaningful dialogue. She emphasizes avoiding questions that invite one-word answers, such as “How are you?” which often results in a polite but predictable response like “good.” Instead, Kerry encourages using open-ended prompts that invite people to share more about themselves, such as “What brought you here today?” or “What are you working on right now?” Asking thoughtful questions often helps people open up. She also recommends looking for relatable entry points, such as “Where are you from?” For example, when Kerry is in Florida and meets someone from upstate New York, that shared background can lead to an easy conversation about familiar touchstones like the Buffalo Bills, chicken wings, or garbage plates.

Kerry reinforces the importance of finding common ground. With the Rolodex of conversation, she notes that reliable topics include the “W” for weather and the “T” for travel. She advises steering clear of political, religious, financial, or news-related topics and instead focusing on subjects people genuinely enjoy discussing. Travel, in particular, offers a natural opportunity to invite others to talk about themselves and deepen the conversation.

Being around like-minded professionals at an event can be energizing, and hearing their stories can spark new ideas or renew focus. Kerry offers follow-up advice to turn a discussion into new connections that are more likely to lead to tangible, local partnerships that help each other grow. For every networking event, she collects paper or digital business cards and follows up on LinkedIn or by email. A recent *Business Insider* research survey estimates that nearly 67% of networking connections are never followed up on, meaning only about one in three people take the next step. Kerry says, “If you go to a networking event and you're the one to follow up, you're going to stand out in the crowd.” She also suggests taking pictures for social media posts, making sure to tag the people and the organization.

Personal networking is also an opportunity to become a connector or mentor for others, which boosts your reputation and leadership profile. Sponsoring events and helping others often comes full circle. Kerry shared, “I've done a variety of networking throughout my career. When I moved to Tampa and became the director of the Women's Business Center, I didn't know anyone in Tampa. It was a challenging time because I moved in the Fall of 2020, during the height of COVID. Although in-person networking was unavailable, I became very proactive networking online through LinkedIn. And then, when things started to open up in person, I attended one networking event a week. And now with Snazzy and

Sage, and I've been in Jacksonville for a little over a year, I try to attend a networking event once a week because again, I'm learning a new part of town. I'm out meeting new people, promoting my business, making some friends, and it's really been a terrific way to build my community.” Kerry has also been heavily involved in alumni networking for Victor High School and Syracuse University. She was the president of the Syracuse alumni group in South Florida and is now the President of the Syracuse alumni club in Jacksonville. She shared, “When back in the Rochester area, I also attend the Syracuse Alumni Club in Rochester to connect and meet fellow Syracuse alumni. It's fun to go watch some football games and basketball games in different cities with fellow alumni.”

As we begin 2026, consider adding more personal networking to your schedule. If you would like to share alumni stories or ideas for VCS networking events, please contact our VCS Educational Foundation Alumni Connections Committee at kpartin1@hotmail.com through Keith Partington.



Dr. Kerry Szymanski is the founder of Snazzy & Sage, where she blends her passion for fashion with a deep commitment to empowering others through style and confidence coaching. With over 20 years of experience in higher education, she currently serves as Department Chair at American Public University System, where she leads academic programs and faculty teams and designs courses and curriculum across entrepreneurship, marketing, and retail management. She has taught undergraduate and MBA courses in fashion merchandising, marketing, strategy, branding, leadership, and entrepreneurship at institutions including American Military University, American Denturist College, American InterContinental University, American Business & Technology University, Global Tech College, and the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale.

Earlier in her career, Kerry gained valuable corporate marketing experience working with prominent brands such as Harry & David, Bally Total Fitness, and Duty Free Americas, honing her expertise in marketing and brand strategy.

Her entrepreneurial journey is diverse and impactful. She was Director of the Tampa Bay Women’s Business Center—an SBA resource partner—where she supported over 4,500

female entrepreneurs in launching businesses and raising more than \$2.2 million in capital. She founded *SassyBB*, a design-your-own purse boutique and sewing school, and later launched Kerry Communications Consulting, helping entrepreneurs and resource organizations build strong brands and businesses.

As a certified Life Coach and fashion stylist, Dr. Kerry has mentored students in fashion shows, led international trips to fashion capitals like New York, London, and Paris, and guided aspiring professionals in the industry. She's also a sought-after speaker and coach, featured in local and national media, and has served as a judge for *America's Next Top Model* and *Miss Hollywood USA*, as well as coaching contestants for *Miss Latina Tampa*.

Dr. Kerry holds a DBA from Argosy University, an MBA from the University of Oregon, and a BA in International Relations from Syracuse University. She is also the author of *Seduce Your Customers*, a keynote speaker, and a stand-up comedian. Based in Jacksonville, Florida, and Rochester, New York, she is passionate about helping others transform their style, confidence, and lives.

You can access Kerry's Snazzy and Sage website at: <https://www.snazzyandsage.com>. Please make sure to listen to the popular Snazzy & Sage Podcast, hosted by Dr. Kerry that features real conversations with remarkable people redefining what it means to thrive in their next chapter at <https://www.snazzyandsage.com/podcast>