

What Can Business Owners Use Networking For?

A better question might be, “What *can't* you use it for?”, because networking is a very versatile tool. Use it to find new

prospects and clients;

vendors;

information resources;

businesses with whom you can cross-market goods and services.

Whatever the goal of your networking, remember that *giving* in a networking relationship is at least as important as getting, and that it's vital to have a good answer to your listener's unspoken question, “*What's in it for me?*”

Prospects and Clients

In the movie *Jerry Maguire*, Tom Cruise plays a sports agent who pleads with his one and only client, “Help me help you.” Turned around, this can help you make the most of your networking. Ask yourself what you can do to make it easy for your listener to help you. If someone's interested enough to ask you to describe your ideal prospect, you're missing a golden opportunity if you reply, in effect, “Anyone who can fog a mirror.” This description is too vague to get anyone thinking. On the other hand, if you say something like, “I'm looking for owners of service businesses with twenty-five or fewer employees who market exclusively to other businesses,” people can easily compare this description with people they know and, one hopes, come up with a match for you.

Leon, president of a company providing Internet services, is active in his local builders' association. This venue allows him to connect with one of his key markets—builders and managers of apartment complexes. His one-minute commercial emphasizes the cost-effectiveness of hiring his company as the ISP for the complex, so that the building owners can profitably provide Internet services as part of their tenants' monthly rent.

Vendors

Looking for a new service provider for your own company is perhaps one of the easiest applications of networking. Asking “Who does your _____ for you? Are you pleased with them? Can I get their name?” may be all you need to get great referrals to someone who will be part of your business success.

Information Resources

People, the Internet, and libraries can all provide important information. Since the trick is to be as efficient and effective as possible in using these resources, be very clear in your own mind what *type* of information you’re looking for. Is it specific data, contact information, background? Once you know exactly what you’re looking for, you’re ready to use your network of contacts to ensure you spend your time wisely. Any of the following questions can quickly set you on the right path:

“I’m looking for information on _____ and I’m not sure where to start. Do you know anyone who has dealt with this situation?”

“Do you know of any websites that provide information on _____?”

“When you were dealing with _____, who did you go to for help?”

Cross-marketing partners

Look for businesses whose products and services *complement* yours and are geared toward the same target market. You can be a highly valuable resource for such companies—and vice versa—for numerous reasons:

Each of you can provide access to contacts in your data base that are not in the other’s.

You can make your clients' lives easier by saying, "If you need help with [name your partner's area of expertise], I know someone I can refer to you." This naturally makes you even more valuable as a problem-solver to your clients. You can serve as subcontractors for one another. You're likely to encounter situations where you alone can't provide all the services a client needs. You can still get the job by subcontracting with someone with the complementary skills you lack. She can charge you her usual rates, which you markup (think of it as a finder's fee) before including in your bill to the client. The client's needs are met with no additional effort on her part, and both you and your partner earn revenue you might not have otherwise had access to.

An example of this is seen in the way Lauri and Sharron work together. Lauri is an outstanding marketing consultant; Sharron has vast experience in publishing and a well developed publishing niche. As is common in the industry, Sharron relies on authors to develop most of the ideas for marketing their books. When Sharron has a client who needs marketing assistance, she can refer the author to Lauri for help in that area. By the same token, if the marketing plan developed by Lauri and her client calls for writing and publishing a book, Lauri can send that prospect to Sharron.

If subcontracting is for some reason not feasible, you can still add to each other's bottom lines with referral or finder's fees.

You can co-sponsor programs and events with your marketing partner, thus reducing costs for both of you while both of you get your names into the marketplace.

You have a built-in brainstorming partner who can help develop new strategies, contacts, even products or services.

Self-Check:

1. How do you currently describe your ideal prospective client? If the description lacks enough specificity to paint a clear picture, revise it so as to make it easier for your listener to say, "I know the exact person you're looking for."
2. What type of vendor do you or will you have need of? Do you have any requirements in terms of size, specialty, geographic location, and so forth?
3. Is there any specific information you're currently looking for? If so, what? The more clearly you can identify what you need, the easier you make it on yourself and on those people you ask for help.
4. Think of your target market. What other products or services do members of this group need? Which of these products and services are a good complement for what you offer?
5. What compelling arguments can you make when suggesting a cross-marketing partnership to another business owner?