

MAKE NETWORKING WORK FOR YOU

BY ANNE SCARLETT

A robust and focused networking strategy is one of the oldest and most effective ways to demonstrate your value to potential clients.

WHO DOESN'T LOVE a good referral?

After all, when someone has referred your services to a prospect, it means you've been vetted—there's a predetermined trust attached to that referral. And let's face it, in comparison to the traditional business development process, referred business takes less time, costs less money and requires less pre-work. And to sweeten the deal, referred business often results in *more*—more scope, more connection, more trust. So, less effort for more reward.

Sounds good, yes? But now you may be asking: How do we go about getting referrals? Becoming a truly “referable” professional is another conversation altogether. (For details, see “How to Generate Referrals and Testimonials” in the Articles section at www.annescarlett.com.) In a perfect world, all of your past clients will refer prospects to your firm. But in addition, referrals can stem from word-of-mouth, aka your network.

Yet what if you don't have a strong, active network? Maybe it's time to get on it. Building and nurturing a network is an ongoing process; it honestly never ends. And while I completely relate to those of you who would prefer not to proactively engage with “strangers” or even acquaintances, we must embrace engagement as a part of doing business in our service-providing industry.

Give and Get

In networking, you have to give (a lot) in order to (possibly) receive. It's about helping others, with the hope that down the road, others will help you. It's not quid pro quo. It can be unbalanced. But the net result—when both parties are well-intentioned and authentic—will most certainly glean positive results. Furthermore, you'll discover that helping others is both professionally, and personally, rewarding.

Being visible—professional organization meetings, civic activities, attending conferences (such as this month's NASCC: The Steel Conference in Orlando), etc.—is only the beginning. After you “grin and grip” and exchange cards, keen follow-up will be your ticket to nurturing a successful networking relationship.

Yet, there's not enough time in the day to follow up equally with everyone we meet. How do we make the process less daunting? I suggest organizing networking contacts into different loose categories: buyers (prospects/existing clients), influencers and informants.

Buyers. Your services are directly relevant to their needs. These folks can, or already have, hired your company.

Your offer to buyers: industry insights, professional advice, warm introductions to your expansive network or referrals (when they have a need that your firm cannot fulfill).

Influencers. These folks can impact the decisions of your prospective buyers. They will not have a direct need for your services.

Your offer: warm introductions to your expansive network or potential referrals.

Informants. This will likely be your largest group of contacts. They are virtually everywhere. These folks rarely directly buy—nor influence the buyers of—your services. They can, however, provide information and access to their own network. And guess what: Your company colleagues are informants. Industry peers are terrific informants. People from your “past life,” such as classmates, professors, bosses, coworkers or extra-curricular peers also serve as informants. Even your family and friends are informants. And believe me, I completely relate to any hesitations regarding mixing business with personal life. But ultimately, you'll be glad that you have at least educated them on what you do and the value that you offer. So don't leave them out of your official network!

Your offer: warm introductions to your expansive network or potential referrals.

Eight Tips

In addition to dedicating time proportionally, based loosely upon each contact's “category,” here are an additional ten tips to consider when networking:

Determine your networking capacity. How many people might you be able to comfortably stay in contact with, particularly on a meaningful level? Don't spread yourself too thin; typically, the most effective networks are more about quality than quantity. Think about how many relationships you can maintain by email and phone, on social media and in person.

Develop a system for maintaining and growing. In networking, absence doesn't make the heart grow fonder; it has

Anne Scarlett is president of Scarlett Consulting, a Chicago-based company specializing in AEC-specific strategic marketing plans, marketing audits and coaching. She is also on the adjunct faculty of Columbia College of Chicago and DePaul University. She can be contacted via her website, www.annescarlett.com.



business issues

the opposite effect! So rough out a multifaceted “touch” plan, to ensure you’ll carve out the time on a regular basis. Some contacts, particularly the buyers, may need increased nurturing—often in the form of face time.

Be clear on what you offer, both professionally and socially. Networking is not selling. Sales pitches, even subtle ones, won’t help you to build your relationships. So what will your conversations entail? In addition to being inquisitive and aiming to make it about them and/or finding common ground, you’ll also need to articulate what you offer.

Practice your conversation skills. Behave like an investigative reporter by asking open-ended, probing questions. In addition, share enough about yourself so that you demonstrate an open, humble vulnerability—but take care not to repeat yourself or pontificate. In summary, aim to be brief about yourself while listening intently to what they offer up. When starting a conversation at industry events, I’ll often approach someone who is standing alone on the sidelines. They are typically appreciative of the outreach!

Position yourself in scenarios where you can be genuine. Feigned interest is obvious. No one has time for that. So don’t waste their time or yours. Instead, gravitate towards groups, activities and events where you can keep it real.

Be mindful of the goal and patient for the outcome. It’s rare to meet someone who immediately wants to buy services from you. Give it time, but also take care not to let someone from your network suck you dry in terms of your time, infor-

mation and introductions. (Oh, the stories I could tell about networking mooches!) If, over time, they continue to take from you—without an effort to reciprocate on any level whatsoever—then it’s time to cut them loose.

Social media is an important piece of the larger networking puzzle. Online communication options are the perfect vehicles to drive your initial face-to-face contact forward. If you “meet” someone online first—in a LinkedIn discussion group, for example—this is a great springboard to meet in person sooner rather than later.

That said, recognize that social media is *not* a replacement for networking. Is IRL (in real life) networking obsolete? Isn’t online networking enough? In short, no and no. Without an expansive reach and a committed approach to remain active online, your social media efforts won’t even come close to what you can achieve in real-life networking. Even if you have a substantial, active online presence (do you?), social media does not replace the face-to-face connections that are imperative for service providers like us. After all, these clients will eventually be working directly with us on projects. The best way for them to gauge the potential for a productive, positive synergy is by spending time together. Bottom line: The rapport and trust that comes with real interaction is irreplaceable.

The merits of networking have stood the test of time. Make sure that you’re maximizing them within your own professional life. ■