

Small Business Know-How

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Networking 101: Tips from Small Business Owners

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In our previous post, [we gave an overview of several types of networking organizations](#). Today, we're featuring several small business owners who regularly network. These networking ninjas share their philosophy and provide some tips on what you should and shouldn't do when making the rounds.

Why Networking is Critical for Small Biz Owners

Michelle Garrett started [her own PR consulting business](#) 14 years ago. She specializes in writing and media relations for clients in a variety of industries, including small businesses. She says networking is critical for small business owners, but not just for the obvious reasons. "Small business owners need to do more networking to make more contacts, not only for possible referrals, but as resources and even as friends you can turn to when you have a question or problem related to your business."

Garrett spends approximately five hours a week networking and she belongs to several organizations, including her local Chamber. She volunteers with each of them (she's on the executive board of one). She chose one organization because it's related to her field. She joined the Chamber because she thought it would be a good way to meet other small business people.

Amy Marks-McGee is a fragrance and flavor trend/marketing consultant and owner of [Trendincite](#). She echoes

Garrett's sentiments regarding how important it is for small business owners to get out there and meet people. She says she's had luck in industry-related groups: "Visibility is important for small business owners because you want to be top of mind and recognized as an expert in your field. Belonging to industry specific organizations, being a board member, and volunteering for industry events are efficient ways to network. For example, I am a member of Cosmetic Executive Women (CEW) and soon after I launched my company, I volunteered as a greeter to check individuals in for an event. I bumped into a colleague from a previous employer who had recently joined a competitor. As it turned out, I landed a project."

It's Better to Give Than It Is to Receive

OK, we know that one of your networking goals is to land new customers. And there's certainly no shame in that. But the most successful networkers (i.e. the ones who tend to get many referrals) tend to be the ones who give back the most to their organizations and its members.

Shanna Tingom, [a financial advisor with Edward Jones](#), regularly practices this concept of giving back. She says, "My networking philosophy is to get to know people so that I can give as many referrals as possible. I find that the more I give to others, the more I get back in return, and it's usually from the people you'd least expect!"

Tingom has been a member of [Business Networking International](#) (BNI) on and off for 20 years. BNI is famous for its "Givers Gain" philosophy. Tingom says, "I firmly believe in the Givers Gain philosophy and I know that no other organization gives its members the global benefits and education that BNI does."

Consider ALL Opportunities, Not Just Formal Ones

While BNI is a popular choice for many small business owners, it's not necessarily for everyone. Tingom acknowledges some of the cons: "The only downsides to BNI are that you are required to attend each week (or have a sub) and the cost could be prohibitive when you figure in the membership dues and food expenses. My membership paid for itself the first month, but if you are selling a smaller ticket item, it may take longer."

Then again, one of the reasons BNI is so successful is *because* it requires members to show up each week. Linda Lovero-Waterhouse is the principal digital marketing consultant at her company, [WSI Web Systems](#). She belongs to a few formal networking organizations, including BNI, her local Chamber, and a Small Biz Networking Meetup group. Regarding her different experiences between formal and informal groups, she says, "The pros of joining organizations without many rules is that it is much more relaxing to attend the meetings and there is no pressure. However, there is often a lot less results."

She also notes that even if you join a BNI group, it takes time before quality referrals start coming in because the people in the group need to get to know you first. "As I have been in my BNI group for over a year now, the other members know, like, and trust me better so the referrals have improved."

Of course, even informal situations can provide opportunities, if you're willing to be open to them. [Mike Fishbein](#) is a partner at [Casual Corp](#) and the author of [How to Build an Awesome Professional Network](#). He says, "Networking can happen at any time and in any place. Going to a party on a Saturday night could be a great networking opportunity. Talking to the person next to you at a coffee shop could lead to a networking opportunity."

Does Networking Work?

The overwhelming answer, at least from the folks we've talked to, is yes. Garrett says, "My business is referral-based, so I don't pay for any marketing (other than maybe business cards). This is directly related to my networking efforts. I've seen the difference when I stopped networking as much for a period of time. I don't think I'd ever do that again! That's how valuable networking is for me and my business."

Tingom says her results are almost too many to list. "I have entirely built my business over the last two years networking through referrals." She also adds that she's met many great people—people she's hired for different services she needed, such as air conditioning and house cleaning to a complete remodel of her front yard. This goes to show how networking is truly a two-way street endeavor.

Fishbein agrees, saying that networking has "helped me open doors and close deals." He adds that he's also met some amazing people, some of whom have become close colleagues and friends. He's also learned a lot from the professionals in his network.

Networking has other tertiary benefits. Lovero-Waterhouse says, "Besides getting business, networking helps me get motivated and adds some structure to my day. It has helped me learn how to describe my business concisely (the Chamber only allows an initial 20 seconds), develop an elevator speech, become more confident speaking in public, and practice creating and delivering presentations."

Networking Do's & Don'ts

Give back

The biggest piece of advice is this: don't make it all about you. Think about how you can help other people first. Lovero-Waterhouse provides some concrete examples of this concept in action: "When I network, I am always thinking of connecting people. Besides direct customers, there is great value in suggesting strategic partners for someone. For example, I have a private investigator as a client and whenever I meet a lawyer, I ask if it would be all right to do an e-introduction. Many of these intros have led to business. Another example is when I paired up a financial adviser who volunteers with senior organizations with a host of a radio show that deals with senior issues. The financial adviser had a blast, was able to leverage the radio show in podcast form on his website, got some exposure, and was able to get more volunteers for his organization that was close to his heart."

Get active

Garrett says that the way for people to really get to know you is by showing up and getting involved. "If you join an organization, do make sure you get involved! This means attending events, at a minimum. I find it's even better if you actually sign up for a volunteer commitment that is either related to what you do or will help you develop a skill in another area that would be beneficial. Volunteering with a group is how you really get to know people."

Follow Up

Garrett, Marks-McGee, Tingom, Fishbein, and Lovero-Waterhouse all mentioned the importance of following up after you meet someone. You might send an email, connect with the person via LinkedIn, and follow him/her on Twitter (or even do all three). But, again, the purpose of following up isn't to sell your business. Tingom notes, "Do follow up with thank you cards, emails and calls after the event if you think there's a way you can help them. Don't try and sell at the event! You are there to build relationships and figure out how you can help others. NOT sell!"

Don't Burn Out

It's easy to think the more networking groups you join, the better, but that's not necessarily the case. First of all, you don't want to spend ALL of your time networking (you still have a business to run, remember?). Second, if you spread yourself too thin, well, we all know what can happen.

Garrett offers this bit of advice: "Don't bite off more than you can chew! Let's face it, there are endless opportunities to attend networking functions and meetings. If you try to do too much, you might get overwhelmed and want to quit entirely. It's better to try out a few groups and then choose the best two or three that you feel are beneficial. Make sure to show up consistently at their functions."

Do Your Part and Expect Great Things

Fishbein offers a three-prong approach to networking success: "First, be authentic. Second, look first to help others without asking for anything in return. Third, think of people in your network who would benefit from knowing each other, and introduce them to each other. Amazing things will happen."

Tell us about your experience networking. Feel free to offer other do's and don'ts as well. Share in the comments.

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