



Networking: Your most valuable self-marketing strategy

Mark Schaefer
Executive Director
Schaefer Marketing Solutions

Whether job-hunting or building a client base for a new business, everyone knows they need to “network.” But getting out there and establishing new relationships is not always easy, especially if you’re busy or uncomfortable in new social situations. Here are some practical tips to creating a meaningful business network efficiently, using the comfort of your own friends as a starting point.

Why network as a marketing strategy?

Self-marketing through “informal” personal networks is more productive than cold-calling, emails or advertising. Networking builds new business relationships by asking for a small favor, information or advice – and almost everyone is willing to comply with that request. A face-to-face meeting enabled by a mutual contact is by far the most effective and powerful opportunity to build new business relationships and learn about new career and business opportunities.

Making these strategic connections has a higher probability of paying off because:

- It is easier to obtain meetings with relevant decision makers if the meeting is set up through the recommendation of a friend to obtain “help” on gaining information, reactions and suggestions.
- The meeting you obtain informally through a friend is more relaxed, permitting easier two-way communication and a better chance to be productive.
- There is a higher probability of obtaining trust through the validation of a mutual friend.

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- Even if there is no direct fit, you can obtain valuable insights and additional referrals.
- Because you are meeting at the recommendation of a friend, you are marketing yourself in less competitive circumstances.
- It helps uncover opportunities you would never discover any other way

Who are your network contacts?

Let's map out a simple networking strategy so you can get started discovering these new opportunities.

First, you need to think about your first line of attack – the “A” contacts. Your “A” contacts are people you already know well. You have instant rapport and credibility. They provide referrals to “B” contacts. “B” contacts are potential customers or people with information and contacts/referrals that can lead to new business opportunities.

Examples of your “A” contacts:

- Former employees, co-workers, bosses
- Colleagues' from clubs, church, professional associations
- Friends, relatives, neighbors
- Owners of businesses you work with
- Customers and suppliers
- Bankers, insurance, lawyers, accountants, doctors, dentist, clergy
- School and college friends

Brainstorm a list of “A” contacts. Think of anyone you know who would ask a favor of you and you would be happy to comply. Those are same people who would happily help YOU. When you are finished, stop for an hour or so and then review the categories of potential “A” contacts again. Try to think of five more names. Sometimes the best networking ideas come after thinking it through a second time!

So how many did you come up with? Most people can easily name 25 “A” contacts or more.

Initial conversation with “A” contacts

Your goal is to reach out to current trusted associates and establish new referrals that can lead to business opportunities. Try to think of a way you can open the conversation that would add value to your friend. Some examples:

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- 1) Renewing the contact and friendship.
- 2) Passing on a bit of news about a mutual friend or common interest.
- 3) Pointing out an article or news about one of their interests or hobbies.
- 4) ... or simply calling to say you have been thinking about them.

After re-establishing friendly contact, ask them for help. Here are some examples:

“I recently lost my job. I know times are tough everywhere but I know my experience and work ethic would be valuable to a new employer. Can you think of any of your friends, suppliers, customers or business partners who might be looking for a _____?”

“I think the business services I provide are particularly well-suited to helping companies who need to cut costs during this recession. Can you think of any of your friends, suppliers, customers or business partners who might benefit from what I do?”

If you are looking for a job, don't pigeon-hole yourself too specifically into a job category when describing your needs. For example, your previous job might have been selling cars, but your core competency is “selling.” If you were an aeronautical engineer, your competency is engineering.

Initial conversation with “B” contacts

- a) Before making a call, visit the “B” contact's website and learn as much as you can about the person and their company. There might be additional information on the Internet through Facebook, Linked In and other social networking sites. Make notes and tailor the call to a product or service relevant to the customer. Is there something from your experience that would be interesting or add value, even in an initial call? The goal is to get a live meeting, so find something that may pique their interest.
- b) Live call or leaving a voice message – “My name is _____ and I was referred to you by our mutual friend, _____. As I was speaking to ____, your name came up as somebody who might be interested in the type of work I do, or that you might know of others who could benefit from my services. I wanted to introduce myself and see if we could meet for coffee or lunch some time soon. I would really like to learn from you and get your perspective on leads for business opportunities. ”
- c) Reaching an assistant – “My name is _____ and I am trying to reach _____. A mutual friend of ours, xxxx, recommended that I give him a call regarding my company and possible ways we could do business together. Would it be possible to be put into his voice mail?” Get the assistant's name, thank them for their help and write down the name for future.

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Meeting with a “B” contact

- a) Bring a list of prepared questions relevant to the contact’s business.
- b) Build rapport with the person relevant to the new business opportunity. Set a positive climate, take a genuine interest in their business, and refer to the mutual friend.
- c) Reassure them by making it clear you don’t necessarily expect new business or a job from them – you would like to introduce yourself and your business services to their company and learn about other possible applications they may know of.
- d) Present a clear and concise picture of your value proposition. What do you do and how do you do it better than others? What unique value do you bring prospective employer? This can reinforced with a resume or list of professional qualifications.
- e) Ask for advice on how you can better market your services. Given what they know about you, what business needs could be addressed? How would they describe your business value? Are the services or talents you described reasonable? What trends do they see that will help or hurt your business? Is there any application for their business needs?
- f) Now that you are building trust with this person, turn the “B” contact into an “A” contact -- they know you and what you do, who do they know who could benefit? If the contact offers referrals, ask them if they would be willing to provide contact information, or even an introduction.
- g) Always send a personal thank-you note immediately after your meeting.
- h) In the note, summarize the actions agreed to in the meeting and a timetable for follow-through.

Networking will significantly improve your chances of finding the jobs and business opportunities that are never posted or publicized. Turn your existing network of friends and colleagues into your personal competitive advantage!

About the author

Mark Schaefer is Executive Director of Schaefer Marketing Solutions, a firm providing marketing strategy and comprehensive out-sourced marketing services (www.businessesgrow.com). Mark has advanced degrees in both marketing and applied behavioral sciences and more than 25 years experience in global sales,

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marketing, new product development, marketing communications, and eCommerce. He has worked in more than 20 countries and developed successful growth strategies for both small businesses and Fortune 100 companies in the U.S., Europe and Asia. In addition to leading Schaefer Marketing Solutions, he is an adjunct professor of organizational management at Tusculum College.



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