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### Getting them to buy with a little help from your friends

When I began my sales career prospecting meant one thing—cold calling. The way a salesperson generated new business was to pound the street knocking on doors or “dialing for dollars” on the phone. I believe that I was successful in sales because I actually liked cold calling; I liked the adventure of walking into unknown situations and the challenge of trying to engage perfect strangers in meaningful conversations. Over the years I sold a lot of advertising and made a lot of friendships by walking in and saying, “Hello, my name is Jim Busch and I’d like to ...” While I still believe there is a place for cold calling, I find it is a lot less effective than it was in the past. Prospects are simply harder to find and harder to engage in conversation. A tough economy and increased competition means that prospects are busier than ever before. The advent of mobile technologies means that business owners are no longer tied to their office making them harder to find. Cold calling was always challenging, but these economic and technological factors make engaging a customer almost impossible. This creates a dilemma for today’s salespeople. We need to attract new advertisers if our papers are to remain viable, but the traditional way to acquire them isn’t working. The obvious answer is we need to find new ways to connect with potential advertisers. In a sense, if the front door is locked, we need to find the backdoor and go in that way. Often the path to that “backdoor” is paved by effective networking.

It is not a coincidence that the top people in almost any field are powerful networkers. Just as a computer is much more productive and can process information faster when linked to a network, we are much more effective when we are part of a strong network. I think one of the best definitions I have seen of networking comes from BusinessDictionary.com:

***Creating a group of acquaintances and associates and keeping it active through regular communication for mutual benefit. Networking is based on the question “How can I help?” and not with “What can I get?”***

This definition contains good advice for anyone who wants to build a strong professional network. Let’s look at how we can use networking to acquire new accounts and build our territories.

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### **Building your network**

We all have networks. Our families, fellow church members, people we know from the gym etc. all form different networks. Our professional network includes our co-workers and our clients. We become part of most of our networks by chance and circumstance. Smart business people know that their professional network is too important a factor in their success to leave to chance. They make building their network a priority and actively seek out people who may be able to help them achieve their goals. They seek out opportunities to meet people who could enhance their network. Take an active role in community organizations. The key word here is “active,” merely paying your dues and having your name in the local Chamber of Commerce directory will accomplish nothing. Volunteering for committees or to work on projects not only increases your visibility and positions you in a good light; it will also help you build valuable relationships. When you work side by side with someone on a worthwhile project, you get to know them and they get to know you. This often forms the foundation for long term relationships.

Organizations are often looking for speakers for their meetings. Volunteer to share your expertise with the group. Don't make your speech a sales pitch for your product. I often give a speech on “The History and Future of Newspapers” to local community organizations. I am introduced as a representative of my company, but I do not talk about us in my address. Invariably I am asked questions about my company and I have discussions about advertising after the meeting. The worst case scenario, my “talk” positions me and my company as experts in our field. We also host free seminars on subjects like marketing, driving traffic to your website; social media etc. and invite local business people. We do not pitch our products, but these events introduce us to people we would not be able to meet otherwise.

Today when most people talk about their network, they are talking about their online “friends.” The main advantage of networking online is the ease of connecting with people. The disadvantage is that these “relationships” are very shallow and casual. You can use these sites to track what is going on in the lives of people in your network. For example, if someone you know wins an award, it is wise to share a comment and congratulate them. Even better, acknowledge them online, but take the time to send them a card in the mail. This will make you stand out from the crowd and help build your relationship in the “real world.” LinkedIn is the best platform for professional networking on the web. You can enhance your “brand” and keep your name in front of your contacts by frequently posting information that is both interesting and useful to your network. You might also want to blog or create an e-mail newsletter to showcase your expertise.

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### **Making a connection**

Good networkers use highly developed inter-personal skills to connect with people and form relationships with them. Dale Carnegie's classic, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, remains one of the best books on engaging others and bringing them into your circle. Instead of shoving your card in the hand of a new acquaintance, ask them about what they do and show interest in them. During a first meeting, do not talk about yourself until the other person asks about you.

Focus on the quality rather than on the size of your network. While you should be friendly and show interest in everyone you meet, you should focus on following up to build strong connections with the people who can help you the most. This includes people who are well respected in the community or who have extensive networks of their own. After a first meeting follow up with a card or at least an e-mail saying, "I enjoyed talking with you. I hope we can meet again." Send them a request to connect on social media. Find reasons to stay in touch with people who enhance your network.

### **Networking is a two way street**

Harvey MacKay's *Dig Your Well Before You Are Thirsty* is one of the best books ever written on the subject of networking. In it MacKay wrote, "In networking, you are only as good as what you give away." Networking is an exercise in reciprocity, when someone does you a good turn you feel obligated to do one for them and vice versa. You should think of your network like a bank account. If you constantly withdraw money without making any deposits, you will soon be bankrupt. If on the other hand, you consistently put in more than you take out, you will become wealthy. In today's society, one of the most valuable commodities is information. Take every opportunity to share new information or creative ideas with the people in your network. One of the most valuable bits of information anyone can share is a sales lead. If you are talking to a customer at her bakery and she says, "I need to have some new electric lines put in," tell her, "I know someone who might help you, would you like me to introduce you?" Pick up the phone and call your electrician customer and say, "Hey Mike, I am with Julie at Cupcakes Bakery, she needs some electrical work, can you help her?" This simple act helps both clients and helps you to build a cast iron relationship with them. If you ask either Julie or Mike for a referral in the future they will go out of their way to help you.

I think one of the best things you can do is to pleasantly surprise people. Keep track of significant events in people's lives. Send them cards for their birthday or their business anniversary. I am a bookworm and I am always

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shopping at used book sales. I make it a point to know what many of the people in my network are interested in or like to read. I often find an out of print or unusual book that suits the person and I mail it to them. You can do the same with home baked goods or an interesting article, the key is you show that person that you are thinking about them. Many people have told me that this brightened up a dismal day. This is a useful technique to use with your company network; you never know when you need someone to get a late ad into the paper.

### **Putting your network to use**

Business runs on trust and relationships. Cold calling is so difficult because the prospect has no relationship with you and no reason to trust you. You are an unknown, a stranger. If you've worked with someone on a committee, they know you and know that you can be trusted. You may not get a sale, but they will at least listen to you. When you need a referral, you are likely to get one from someone who is in your network. Since they know and trust you, there is little risk in introducing you to someone else. When you are referred to a new prospect, you are much more likely to get a meeting because you are "borrowing" trust from the person the prospect knows. You'll note that the word "trust" keeps coming up in the discussion of networking. Writer Warren Bennis said, "Trust is the lubricant that allows organizations to work." By building a network of strong trusting relationships, you remove many of the obstacles which prevent you from selling new prospects.

Networking is like gardening. It is a lot of work, requires constant attention and you have to let it have time to grow before you can take a harvest. But like gardening, a few tiny seeds when properly planted will yield amazing results. If you take the time and effort to build a strong professional network you'll not only "get by" with a little help from your friends, you'll have many more customers "buy" with a little help from your network.

*This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.*

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