

Making a Network Connection

When you're promoting a new business, especially one with an arcane specialty, the wider your circle of contacts the better

Q. I am a professional coach, presently focusing on "presence" -- how people present themselves to the world, in relationships, and as leaders. While I'm targeting a variety of potential clients, including corporate executives, doctors, and other high-profile professionals, I'm interested in working with just about anyone. What are some different ways to get the word out about my services? What I offer is unique, especially when judged against what other coaches dealing with communication or public speaking are doing, and I want my marketing to make that distinction. -- C.D. Boston

A. What makes you different from any other coach? I read the impressive promotional materials that accompanied your letter, but I still think it's a difficult question to answer. Before you take offense, consider this anecdote: I just met someone who told me she is one of just "30 certified dream coaches" in the U.S. Impressive as this may sound, it left me unmoved. As someone who knows nothing about the field, I had never heard of the guru with whom she trained. Thus, for me, the esoteric credential she mentioned conveyed little meaning. Now, back to you. To those of us who are not in the coaching business, the differences that you say set you aside from others in your profession will seem very subtle indeed.

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL. Thus, I'm going to tackle your question the way I approach my public relations consulting practice. I don't publicize my business, except through my Web site. Instead, what I do is publicize clients in whom I see PR potential. You can be brilliant and an expert, but your business might not lend itself to PR. Indeed, publicity isn't the only way to market your business, and it doesn't work for every kind of business.

Networking is the best approach for your business. I am a strong advocate of joining local and regional Chambers of Commerce and other networking groups. As a woman business owner, you should investigate networking organizations for women business owners. The Boston area has at least two: New England Women Business Owners and the South Shore Women's Business Network (of which I am a member). Another organization is Business Networking International, which has chapters all over the world.

Just recently, for example, my CPA, whom I know through the South Shore Women's Business Network, retained me to do publicity for an organization of which she is treasurer (last year, I referred a client I'd met at a networking function to her). And that hasn't been the only case of networking's power to achieve results. Another client came to me as the result of an encounter with a mutual friend at a reception for a nonprofit group that we both support. One client, whom I met through the Neponset Valley Chamber of Commerce, sold his company, relocated, brought me in at the new company, left it, then brought me in on his new venture.

HOT DATE. Another small client, whom I also met at a networking function, is now giving me invaluable referrals, ones likely to prove far more lucrative than my relationship with his outfit has been. Yet another client came through a suggestion from a newspaper reporter with whom I had a blind date. The reporter said the CEO of this \$20 million business needed coaching on the value of PR, so I called him and tactfully relayed what the reporter said. The CEO clearly didn't need such coaching and appreciated it when I agreed with him. Then he hired me anyway!

Networking isn't just about the people you meet in person at breakfasts, lunches, and business expos --it's the people those initial contacts know. It's also about giving, not taking, so you should be as eager to make referrals as you are to receive them. Believe me, that attitude will soon come back to you. Carry business cards everywhere you go, including to weddings and on vacation (keep them in every pocketbook). Join the committee of a networking organization and make

yourself well known to fellow members and the group's board. And don't view networking events as work. Rather, see them as an extension of your social life, as fun gatherings, where you exchange business cards and talk about work as well as your personal life. You'll make friends and, believe me, you'll get clients.

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