

# Innovative Networking Can Be a GPS to New Business

*Here are seven important ways to mingle, market, and make the most of human connections for a better business.*

By John M. Greene

**A**T&T made an impact with its slogan, “Reach out and touch someone.” And it’s a business mantra that’s every bit as important for our industry as it is for the telecommunications world, especially if done correctly and with some out-of-the-box strategy.

Maybe for AT&T, getting in touch with someone means nothing more than simply picking up a phone. But if that’s the only way you are trying to reach new customers these days, then you are definitely dialing a wrong number.

If you believe “out-of-the-box” networking is just limited to Facebook, LinkedIn and passing out your business card at the local supermarket, then you are indeed working with a very small box. Your box holds a ring; mine holds a refrigerator.

Truth be told, I do use Facebook and LinkedIn for a portion of my networking (which I will explain a little later), but we are all surrounded by endless possibilities when it come to ways of reaching new clients. It’s simply a matter of finding them and using them to your advantage.



ILLUSTRATION: RON PENNELLS, LCT ART DIRECTOR

## SPORTS TEAMS

For example, we have found partnering with professional sports teams to be beneficial in driving our business (and “driving” their business). Not only does it give us the opportunity to pick up a sure client (the team), but also gain access to thousands of potential clients. Most sponsorships come with “perks,” in the form of tickets, signage on scoreboards, program ads, and select nights when you can “woo” your good clients and potential clients, often in private suites. Aligning with a local sports team also boosts your credibility. People feel if a major sports team is letting you drive around an athlete that is worth to them millions of dollars in human capital (which we have done with the Boston Bruins), then a level of trust has been forged.

I understand, that for many companies, aligning with the New York Yankees or Los Angeles Lakers is not going to be very cost-effective. But you can bet if you’re based in Ohio, the Toledo Mud Hens would welcome you with open arms when they throw out their first pitch next May. We found working with the Pawtucket Red Sox last season was a budget-friendly alternative to working with the Boston Red Sox.

## BE A JOINER

Other means we found to be effective included joining large regional organizations, as well as remembering not to ignore the smaller business universe that’s all around us.

Based just south of Boston, we are involved with the New England Business Travelers Association, but also the local Chamber of Commerce where we are located, and all the smaller Chambers in the cities and towns that surround us. It’s easy to think that only the large regional associations have clout while the local business groups are populated with the likes of the manager for a nearby Walmart. But you need to keep the mindset, no matter how far out there it may seem, that if the CEO of Walmart ever visits that store, he’s not going to take a cab from the airport. You also can offer to give a speech to a local organization or association. Chances are likely that you have expertise to share.

# 3.

## WORK THE LUNCHROOM

Sometimes the best networking is where you least expect it, as in your company lunchroom. Your own company could very well be a mother lode of networking opportunities. For example, maybe one of your target companies is ABC Pharmaceuticals. But if you don't ask, you'll never find out that Brenda in your accounting department is married to the brother of the CEO of ABC Pharmaceuticals.

# FOUR.

## COMP A RIDE

Sometimes networking involves biting the bullet a little. We try to attract potentially major clients by letting them "test drive" our services by offering a free car next time one of their VIPs comes into town. But this is an idea that should be used in moderation. Sending a car makes sense, but I am not sure offering a fleet of limo buses gratis to a potential client is cost-effective. I said bite the bullet, not swallow it.

# FIVE.

## SWAG & STUFF

Promotional items are also a tried and tested way to network. We have used a simple 12-ounce coffee mug with our name on it for the past five years and we still get comments on it. But then again, thinking a little different doesn't hurt. I recently visited a winery and got to be involved in making and bottling my own wine (I didn't get to stomp on the grapes, but I did get to crush them by hand), and returned with cases of bottles. What I'll do is slap on a label with the name of our company and something I'll perceive as witty ("We don't wine about providing good service") and off they go to potential clients.

# SIX.

## CHARITABLE EFFORTS

Involvement in charitable events also can generate attention to your company. Being on the board of a charitable event or organization puts you rubbing elbows with major players. Plus, charitable events, along with just being a feel-good thing, are media magnets when it comes to generating press for your company.

# 7.

## INBOUND MARKETING

Finally, I want to touch upon a trend that has picked up lately in the networking world, known as inbound marketing. For our company, this has been a virtual GPS in navigating from marketing to sales, and a tool we believe is the best opportunity to add new business. Each month we do two blogs and one eblast which are generated through our website and social media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, etc. Then our sales team, each of whom belong to at least 50 social media groups (i.e. corporate travel planners, wedding planners, travel associations, etc.), send it to their contacts, and so on and so on. Since we implemented inbound marketing, we already have seen the number of contacts who entered our company website through LinkedIn alone jump 35%.

There are many ways to network in 2013 and going forward. You can put your name on an article that offers useful information and you will instantly come to people's attention. And it doesn't matter if it's for your local newspaper or the newsletter from the Chamber of Commerce. If you're lucky, you might even get published in a major industry publication.

Diana Ross made a bundle singing, "Reach out and touch somebody's hand, make this world a better place if you can." This isn't to say that if you use your imagination and resources wisely when business networking you'll prevent global warming and save the Amazon rainforest. But you just might make the world a more profitable place for your company. **LG**

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