

Get the Most From Your Business Networks

Small-business owners have found that networking is a productive use of their time.

“Networking effectively lets others know you are in business and keeps customers and potential customers updated on changes in the business, as well as new products and services,” says (Insert name) of (Insert title and county). “It also helps the business owner find answers to questions and new resources. Finally, it provides an early warning system of upcoming changes that might impact his or her business.”

Research suggests that networking is one of the most effective marketing tools because it has little cost, other than time, and offers one of the best returns on the investment.

Networking occurs in many different ways and takes many different shapes. For many small-business owners, it begins with belonging to the local Chamber of Commerce. Networking opportunities occur in other business meetings as well. Networking also can be done in almost any social settings and includes simple efforts such as stopping by the store next door on your way to get the mail.

Yet given all of the positives that can come from networking, many business owners are not actively involved in networking in some form. Other owners are doing networking but are not getting everything they can out of the efforts they make.

So why don't business owners network?

They have not found it to be an effective tool for them, according to Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service's rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist.

“After trying it for a while, the owner has become discouraged and has lost his or her passion or enthusiasm for continuing the effort,” says Muske. “At that point, business owners just do not see the reason for putting more time and effort into in this marketing option.

“It is important to remember that the business owner is extremely busy and he or she is trying to get the most out of every minute of every day,” Muske continued. “The owner is busy with day-to-day activities and is just trying to keep up with the daily grind of work, bills, ordering, etc., as well as trying to maintain some level of work-life balance.”

Here are some suggestions for helping business owners not involved in networking:

* The first and easiest may be to simply continue to invite them to networking events. And don't stop at inviting them; be their mentor. Not only help make introductions but also help them see the effectiveness of networking.

* Remind business owners that they need to stay optimistic. Many of the networking efforts they make will bear few results. That is OK and should be expected. If you walk away from a networking event with one or two good contacts, it was a good event.

* Next, do not give up. Just because someone is not interested in networking today does not mean he or she will feel the same way tomorrow. Through time, we change, life changes, the outside world changes. With those changes, owners may become interested in networking.

* Lastly, remind them and yourself that this networking effort can lead to some new opportunities for both of you. If you know a business you think would be a good fit with your business, work with the business owner to help him or her build that network. As you go about that effort, you are building a relationship that can have a payoff for both of you.

Networking is part of a business's growth process. It takes time. As businesses grow, the business owner often will realize he or she needs to spend more time working "on the business" and perhaps less time working "in the business."

For more information and tips about business networking, contact your local Extension Service office at [insert phone number and email address]. Also visit NDSU's small-business support website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness and sign up for the monthly newsletter, or visit www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship. Federal and state resources such as the Small Business Administration and Small Business Development Centers also are prepared to help.

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For more information, contact glenn.muske@ndsu.edu or call (701) 328-9718. You also can visit our website, www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness.