

Making Valuable Contacts Online

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Summary: It's not what you know, it's who you know, and you need to network online.

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Remember the old saying: "it's not what you know, it's who you know"? It's true. Your contacts determine whether your business succeeds or fails, and for reasons of credibility, that's doubly true online.

Many people bristle when someone suggests that they network. If the term networking puts you off, then think of it as making friends. People do business with people they know, and your prospective clients need to hear your name many times before they buy from you.

Networking should be a cornerstone of your business. As my

marketer friend Sally says: "Networking makes all your business activities more effective."

Sally loves using the Internet to develop new contacts. She believes that you can establish business relationships more easily online than you can offline. "I'd rather have someone email me a proposal, than phone me. And if I'm the one creating the proposal, I'll do a Web search on their business before I email them. The more you know about them the more effective your initial contact will be. I'm flattered if I know that someone has taken the time to find out about our business before they contact me for the first time."

= Making new contacts step by step

With several hundred million people online, no matter how tiny your niche market, you'll find it easy to make contacts online. Some of these contacts will be people who are in the same business you're in, others will be suppliers, or prospective clients.

Note: some people hesitate to make contact with competitors. When I suggested to a copywriting student of mine that she should contact local copywriters to see they were charging, she freaked out. She didn't want to have anything to do with her competition.

This is a short-sighted attitude, because:

- * whatever your business, it's a small world. People know people, and people talk. If people know you because they've had some contact with you, then when they're asked about you, they're more apt to speak kindly of you;
- * you'll learn what's happening in your industry: who's hiring, who's landed a big new contract, and who's slow-paying;
- * you've got someone to whom you can refer clients, if the clients want something that you can't provide (and with luck, your contacts will refer people to you);
- * it's educational: you can swap techniques, suppliers, and shortcuts;
- * and most importantly, you can find out what other local businesses are charging, and why.

So how do you start making valuable contacts online?

== Step One: Do a search for people in the same business you're

in

You'll need to know who's doing what you're doing. Check out their Web sites, bookmark their URL, and enter the names and contact details into your contact management program.

(Go to Better Whois, at <http://www.betterwhois.com/> to get the business owner's contact details.)

See whether they offer services or products which are complementary to yours. You might be able to form a loose partnership.

If it's appropriate, you could offer them a link on your Web site in return for a link on theirs. However, be careful with this. Don't go linking here, there and everywhere online for the heck of it. Ubiquitous linking makes it look as if you don't know what you're doing.

== Step Two: In what fields do you want to expand your client base?

When looking for prospective clients, think in terms of industries or professions.

If many of your clients are doctors, perhaps you want to contact more doctors, or perhaps you want to contact dentists or lawyers.

If you're a writer, maybe you've been targeting health and fitness magazines. What other interests and knowledge do you have? Perhaps you once worked for a construction company. Trade magazines pay quite well, so investigate construction magazines. Enter the magazines into your database, and send the editors a letter or e-mail message introducing yourself.

== Step Three: Budget time for networking

Networking won't pay off with instantly, and too much networking can eat up a lot of time. So make a networking schedule for yourself.

If you're working in your small business fulltime, budget half an hour or so every couple of days for networking, or put in an hour a week. If you're a part-timer, try to put in a couple of hours a month.

== Step Four: Don't be put off by a lack of response

If you send an e-mail message, and don't get a response, don't take it badly. Like most other people, I've got a rapid-fire delete finger, and I'm sure that occasionally I delete a valuable

message by mistake. Blame it on the spam circus that e-mail has become.

Don't badger people, but if you're not getting a response via email, send them a fax or a letter.

Start making online contacts today, and watch your business thrive!

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