

Networking know-how

Join a board to build contacts that will help your business grow

By Elizabeth Verwey

How can you extend, enhance and expand your business network? Join a board of

trade, chamber of commerce, association or charitable cause. You will meet people who are ready to network. Then become an active participant by taking a leadership role.

This gives you the chance to get to know these people well and deepen the relationship.

Volunteer work brings a group of individuals together for a common cause. Board work has a level of commitment that brings benefits and responsibilities. This attracts people who are interested in a long-term commitment to the cause. Board terms generally vary from one to three years. Deep trust can be established in that time frame. It could even lead to a connection that wins your business a big contract.

My two years on the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers (CAPS) board taught me many things. People work together as a team to bring their time and resources to the table. We really get to know one another when values and ethics are discussed. We buy from people we like and trust. We also get to know whether we would recommend them to friends and family members.

Richard Peterson, president of Peterson and Associates (www.passociates.com) provides executive presentation coaching. Peterson found that his CAPS board work raised his own visibility and acceptance as a professional speaker. He emceed meetings for a year. He's now on a first-name basis with some of the best speakers in the business. Peterson says that the CAPS board work made his transition from corporate life to the entrepreneurial world smoother. He is confident that it cut his learning curve in half.

Board members are formally introduced at each public meeting. They are often asked to make announcements or take other leadership roles.



Photo: Corbis

Jess Joss, president of Insiteful Solutions (www.insitefulweb.com) provides Web services. She is in her second year as a board member with the North York Chamber of Commerce (NYCC) in Ontario. Joss values the free publicity her company gets on Chamber letterhead, Web masthead and other printed materials.

Joss understands that we each see the world from our own paradigm, and she gets a broader understanding of current events through her discussions with other board members. She also enjoys the perk of attending public events as a board representative. The Mayor's Art Ball is a recent example of her responsibility in that role for the chamber.

Jean Crawford, president of Crawfordconnect, an executive search firm for the voluntary sector, has been volunteering on boards for 20 years. She is in her fourth year as a director of the Canadian Centre of Philanthropy. Crawford remembers that she did know a few people when she started with that national board. Those relationships deepened, and new ones blossomed. Board members travel across the country four times a year, so her network has been extended. On this board, there is also committee work in between meetings. The board member who attends these committee meetings reports back to the larger board.

Crawford observed that board work offers entrepreneurs the opportunity to see how others work in a situation where you don't have control. We can learn to be politically astute. Boards are a place to meet and learn more about the larger community. "Some of my best friends, I originally met while serving on committees or boards," says Crawford.

Tips to grow your business

Want to grow your business? Do you want to get the word out about your company but you don't know where to start? There are several databases that you can plug into to help expand your business.

It pays to promote your goods and services to government departments, to let them know what your company has to offer and why you should be their supplier. If you're not persistent, departments won't get to know your products or services.

Contracts Canada, an online service by Public Works and Government Services, maintains a list of suppliers accessible by all federal government buyers. You only have to register once for all those potential buyers to see your information. Register online at <http://contractscanada.gc.ca/erv/regist-e.htm>

SourceCAN is a free e-marketplace that shows the world what Canada has to offer. This database service matches Canadian products and services with thousands of business opportunities posted by domestic and foreign corporations and governments. To join, register on-line: <https://www.sourcecan.com/>

The Virtual Trade Commissioner is another useful database to get into if you are ready to export. It contains profiles of Canadian qualified exporters of goods and services and is used by Canadian posts abroad to match exporting opportunities with Canadian firms. Register at: <http://www.infoexport.gc.ca>

To find out more about how to access these and other business opportunities, call 1 888 576-4444 for the Canada Business Service Centre nearest you or visit www.businessgateway.ca on the internet.

- News Canada



How do you find the best board for you? Use the Internet to research local boards or chambers. Go to the library to review an *Encyclopedia of Associations and Not-for-Profits*. It is a valuable resource to find groups in your community. Be sure to choose a board that is involved in a cause that you would like to support.

Find out how often the board meets, and if there are committee meetings in between. Go to a few meetings to assess if this is a group that you would like to support. Have a conversation with a few of the board members. Ask if there is room on the board for new people, and find out when the elections are held.

There is a learning curve when you begin work with a board. You are introduced to a group of people who may already have strong roles and relationships.

Be prepared to spend time learning the ropes. The bylaws of boards are similar.

You will be able to use most of this information on other boards. ■

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