



"This is always a challenge," Hirst-Carnes says. "Relationship data is essentially a business asset. Our clients realize this, so they are willing to invest time and effort managing it so it's useful."

Six years ago, while working on a newsletter for Southview Design in Inver Grove Heights, Minn., I asked about the mailing list. Although the company had been in business for more than two decades, had touched thousands of customers and buyers, the mailing list was incomplete and out-of-date. Prospect, vendor and "old client" data was scattered on personal computers, phones, file folders and Post-It Notes.

Over time, the company has gradually made a transition to a more systematic approach to relationship building, starting with cleaning up and using the database. Today the entire company is focused on increasing its value to customers and building stronger referral relationships. The database is used consistently to manage a sophisticated networking effort. They know where their business comes from, who their best referral sources are and where they need to focus their time and energy in order to attract and close more business.

"The database is critical to our success. Without it we would not be able to build successful marketing and sales programs," says Karen Filloon, Southview's marketing manager.

### Step Three: Create your plan

Research on social networks, including the work of Mark Granovetter ("The Strength of Weak Ties"), shows that social networks are really networks of networks of networks of networks. Within any network, there are usually several smaller networks. So, it's not just the quantity and quality but also the diversity of your connections and your ability to maintain them that matters.

A mix of strong and weak ties is crucial. Put simply, ties to people in networks different from your own enhance the power of your network.

Social networking tools like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn make it easier to maintain not only strong ties, but weaker ones as well. Are all 500 people in your LinkedIn network strong connections? Maybe not, but they could be a link to your next job, opportunity or client.

How you choose to work your network will depend on your goals and objectives.

Your plan should include who, how and when. Who will you network with? How will you maintain and nurture relationships? When and how often will you touch your social and business contacts? Obviously, you will connect in different ways with different people. Most companies choose a mix of e-mail, direct mail, social media, events, associations, community involvement, meetings, phone calls and personal touches to build their networks.

**Add value.** Before you tweet, call, e-mail, post or communicate make sure you are positioned to add value to the relationship or the conversation.

"Networking is all about building the relationship, like layers of an onion," says Todd Polifka, Brush Masters president. Since the downturn, the company has made a commitment to develop a larger circle of influence in the industry using a mix of networking strategies. In addition to involvement in industry



(Photo credit: Photos courtesy of Anthony Tripp, CR, CKBR, CLC)

*The Meet and Greet, which takes place during the NARI Business Meetings, fosters National Members networking with the contractor members.*



*Trade shows are a great place to network as you will meet people who might not be in your immediate area.*

## Recommended Reading on Social Networking

- "Enabling Positive Social Capital in Organizations" by Wayne Baker
- "Gossip and Reputation" by Ron Burt
- "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion" by Robert Cialdini
- "In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work" by Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak
- "The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything" by Steven M.R. Covey
- "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference" by Malcolm Gladwell
- "Relationship Economics: Transform Your Most Valuable Business Contacts into Personal and Professional Success" by David Nour
- "The Anatomy of Buzz: How to Create Word of Mouth Marketing" by Emanuel Rosen
- "Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age" by Duncan Watts



*Networking allows you to find people who can advise you on business challenges that they have overcome.*

associations such as NARI, they use LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter to learn about prospects, engage with customers and build a “deeper client experience.”

Brush Masters also provides social media consulting and seminars—ChattyMasters—to clients, prospects and business partners. Polifka says they saw a need in the industry for low-dollar marketing strategies.

“If our clients didn’t grow or stabilize, we knew that would impact us as a supplier,” he says. “So we made a decision to be more progressive, more giving. So it’s not all about us. We can act like a supplier and tell them how great we are at paint and drywall or we can act like a partner and help them build their business.”

**Make the message sharable.** In Minneapolis-based TreHus Architects, Interior Designers and Builders’ award-winning video, happy clients rave about the firm’s remodeling process. The video is posted on the company’s Website and on YouTube.

“We sent an e-mail with a link to the video to our clients,” says Brit Amundson, marketing manager. “The feedback we got was great. Not only did they love the video; a few of them forwarded it to their friends. The video makes it easy for people to talk about us.”

**Get a social life.** It’s OK to socialize with business contacts. If you like someone, invite them to play a round of golf, have coffee or go to a football game. Go through your database and find 30 people you’d like to know better and have a party. Are you keeping in touch with your friends? Have you asked how they are doing? Do they know what you are doing? And how they can help you? If you don’t tell them, how will they know?

**Go online.** Use social media as part of your networking strategy to engage with your network. But make sure you listen before you jump in. Tweeting, blogging, Facebooking and other forms of online networking aren’t about broadcasting your features and benefits, they’re about having conversations, keeping in touch, and adding value to relationships.

**Make time.** It may feel like you don’t have time to stay on top of your networking effort, but it’s only a matter of time before you’ll pay the price. One day, you’ll find yourself unemployed, or your pipeline will dry up, and you’ll kick yourself for not building a supportive network. ■

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## Seven Networking Tips

**1 Get organized.** Make sure everything from your planner, accounting system, e-mail, BlackBerry, sticky notes and business cards gets entered into a single database. Gather together contacts from throughout your organization. Involve members of the team in the effort. Make it part of their job. You’ll get buy-in faster if you can connect the effort to compensation, performance evaluations, or incentives.

**2 Prioritize and segment.** Sort your contacts into groups to allow you to better manage the quantity, time and dollars you spend nurturing each contact. Have you received referrals from people in your network? Create a folder, group or tag called “Referral Source.” This group may get special attention such as company logo wear, holiday cards or an invitation to an event you are hosting or attending. Pay attention to both weak and strong links.

**3 Get over yourself.** If you are Tweeting, blogging, writing a newsletter, sending an e-mail, balance the message so it’s not all about you. It’s fine to keep people informed about your product or service, as long as you don’t over do it. Think about your audience—what’s in it for them?

**4 Put it in the calendar.** Consistency is important to develop trust. If you are part of an industry association, charitable group, PTA, etc, make sure you set goals for your attendance. Don’t treat networking events as extra credit. Imagine these events are meetings with important clients—put it on the calendar, show up and be prepared to make some new connections and help others succeed.

**5 Invest in your relationships.** Respect your relationships enough to invest in them with your marketing dollars. In referral-based businesses, consider spending up to 50% of your marketing dollars to develop, manage and implement relationship-building strategies.

**6 Personalize your communication.** The more personal you can make your communication, the better. Broadcast e-mail and social media are all good, but don’t underestimate the impact of a personal touch. Saying thank you for reaching out the old-fashioned way—with a handwritten note or letter—shows that you value and respect the relationship.

**7 Be supportive.** The most successful networkers develop systems for nurturing relationships with their contacts using a variety of touchpoints. And they don’t take existing relationships or referrals for granted. Build systems for connecting with everyone in your network on a regular basis and for giving high-value relationships extra attention. Remember, networking isn’t just about sales—it’s about building a supportive social circle. Look for ways to be supportive to the individuals and companies in your network and build your follow-up strategies around giving, not getting.