

Internet Networking Makes Networking Easy

Networking is one of the most effective ways to find clients for any consulting or professional services business. But if you limit your networking to only what you can do in person, you'll be missing out on a huge number of possibilities.

Networking is more than entering a room full of people and exchanging business cards. It's creating a pool of contacts with whom you can exchange clients, referrals, resources, ideas, and information. Networking can happen by phone, by mail, over coffee, and increasingly, over the Internet.

The growth of the Internet has created many new ways to network without ever leaving your home or office. Pick a topic, any topic, and there will be multiple web sites and online communities devoted to it. Almost any type of Internet presence offers opportunities for networking.

In your favorite search engine, type the name of your profession or specialty, such as "property" or "fengshui." Or, if you have a clearly defined target market, you can use that, such as "realty" or "geomancy." Skip the sponsored links or banner ads and focus on the detailed results. What you will find is Internet networking opportunities such as the following:

Professional Associations & Schools - Many association or school sites provide member rosters, resource pages, back issues of newsletters, event calendars, and bulletin boards or discussion lists. Not all of these features will be restricted to members or students.

Resource Sites & Online Communities - These include directories of people in the profession, vendors, articles, event calendars, bulletin boards, discussion lists, live chats, and links to even more resource sites.

Publications - Magazines and newsletters maintain sites that offer everything from back issues to complete online communities.

Job Postings - These may appear on any of the above sites, and often include opportunities for independent professionals, not just those looking for full-time employment.

Colleagues & Competitors - Colleagues and competitors may be exactly the same people, depending on your relationship with them. Their sites will tell you more about them and their work, and may offer many of the same features as resource sites.

know in a collegial way, e-mail them. But never directly approach for business the people you find there. You might find yourself banned from membership.

Discussion Lists - These are like bulletin boards, but are e-mailed to members of the list daily, weekly, or whenever a new posting arrives. When posting to these lists, you can include more information about yourself in a signature box at the end of each e-mail. Keep it short, but include some reason for people to get in touch with you outside the list, such as, "Subscribe to my free newsletter," or, "Visit my web site for a free resource guide."

In addition to locating discussion lists through search engines as described above, you can find them through online community hosts such as Yahoo Groups or MSN Groups.

Live Chats - Many online communities sponsor real-time chats on specific topics. Participating in these chats is an excellent way to meet people interested in the subject being discussed. Chat rooms that require membership are best for Internet networking, because you are more likely to encounter professionals seriously interested in the topic instead of people just looking for a date.

Attending chats featuring a guest speaker can be more valuable than you might think. If you ask a question during one of these, don't be surprised if people contact you by e-mail during or after the chat to offer you more resources related to your question. You can make exactly the same type of contacts when you are the one who has something to offer.

Articles - Notice who is writing them and who is being written about. These people are likely to be leaders in your field, or at least highly visible. That makes them good Internet networking contacts for you. Send them an e-mail complimenting them on the article and suggesting you get acquainted for mutual benefit. Make a specific suggestion about what you can offer such as referrals or resources.

Others in Your Field - These may be colleagues, competitors, vendors, or potential clients. Approach them collegially with ideas about how a relationship could benefit you both, such as exchanging referrals, pooling resources, links on each other's web site, or trading endorsements or articles in each other's ezine.

If you can't find a board, list, chat, or site with the exact focus you want for Internet networking, consider starting one of your own. While hosting one of these communities takes time and effort, it will also put you in the center of the network that forms around it instead of on the outskirts.

C.J. Hayden is the author of www.getclientsnow.com.

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