

# **Business networking is a form of marketing communications**

Last week, I attended the Women & Business: An Atlantic Exchange, which was an event showcasing women's business concerns organized by The Atlantic magazine. One of the segments included an interview with Melanie Whelan, CEO of SoulCycle, a boutique indoor cycling studio.

Ms. Whelan spoke at length about the SoulCycle culture and its business model. Soul Cycle concentrates on providing a special experience to its customers, where they feel part of a community. She said that SoulCycle has never advertised, instead relying on satisfied users to become brand ambassadors, to discuss their positive experience with friends and in social media, promoting the company. In this way, SoulCycle has grown from being a one-of studio on the Upper West Side of New York to having several studios in many large metropolitan areas.

Ms. Whelan offered several interesting insights about her company's corporate culture, brand experience and market growth, and it's worth watching her presentation:

## **Word-of-mouth marketing**

Over and over, you hear businesses claim that their best marketing is word-of-mouth and/or referrals. In SoulCycle's case, it seems that word-of-mouth marketing has paid off in spades.

And yet, at this very forum, which was intended both to help women entrepreneurs get some solid information and to network with each other, I saw first hand how hard it is for most people to network and connect with each other.

## **Networking can be hard for some**

There were women who seemed very shy, and couldn't seem to even smile or even look at strangers.

There was a woman with bad body odor. Whether or not she was aware of the issue, I am not sure, but I would think many people steered clear of her.

There was a woman, standing next to me at the buffet line, who barely acknowledged an ice breaker comment I made. Even after being given an easy way to chat, she refused to do so. I am not sure if it was lack of interest or shyness or perhaps she was just hungry.

Then there was the socially awkward woman I sat down next to inside the auditorium. She dropped her papers and I picked them up and handed them to her, and she didn't even acknowledge me or thank me. She then started taking notes off my printed agenda, without so much as a word or an "excuse me, but may I see your agenda." And even worse, she kept falling asleep and leaning on me. Seriously.

### **But networking is an essential business skill**

Then there was a woman who smiled, shook hands and introduced herself, making it easy to converse. She understood the power of networking. As she said to me, networking isn't about closing a sale, but rather about meeting people who will remember you and perhaps refer to you later on when a need arises for them or in their circle.

Networking is the most basic form of marketing communications. It's your opportunity to introduce yourself and your business on a personal, one-to-one level. It is an essential part of business and professional development.

It's not easy for most folks, myself included, to walk into a room full of strangers and just chat it up. But there are ways to make it less intimidating.

**Think quality versus quantity.** You don't have to meet everyone in the room. If you meet one or two people, and get to know them, you will be doing well.

**Think about what you do and how to best communicate it.** It's easy to get stuck in thinking everybody understands what you do, but chances are good that they won't. Think of a simple way of introducing yourself and your business, and that allows for questions to follow.

**Understand that other people in the room are just as uncomfortable as you are.** A smile goes a long way in making people relax.

If you are still having trouble connecting, perhaps you should consider some outside help. Perhaps you can hire a business coach to help you refine your approach and to give you pointers.

How do you network? What works best for you? Please share in the comments.

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## **Are you reinforcing your message?**

I had a conversation with a potential client the other day, and she was saying she wasn't sure she needed to continue advertising as most of her customers came from word of mouth/referral.

Word-of-mouth and referrals are very powerful marketing forces, but they do not operate in a vacuum. Most people take

their time making a decision, even when they have a referral (or referrals) in hand. People often like to do some research themselves, even when they have glowing recommendations (just because a hair salon did wonders for straight-haired Jane does not mean they can do wonders for curly-haired Joan). This is why you need to reinforce your message.

**Often, you need to remind your potential clients/customers of why they should consider working for you.** You also need to let them know the basics: how to contact you, where you are located, who you work with, how much you charge, what your services/products are.

How do you reinforce your message? You can do it several ways:

1. Have an updated, attractive, easy-to-navigate website.
2. Have marketing materials such as ads, brochures, etc. as necessary for your target. For example, if your target audience reads specialized journals, it makes sense to advertise there. If your target walks past your store, it may make sense to have brochures or information cards available.
3. Have an updated, complete LinkedIn profile and on other social media channels as appropriate.

Relying on word of mouth without reinforcing the positive referral will not always result in business for you and could actually work against you.

What are you doing to reinforce your message?

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# Nothing falls out of the clear blue sky

One would hope anyway....

You know the feeling of having something just fall into your lap? It's pretty sweet to get work/clients/customers "out of the clear blue sky." But, the thing is, they aren't just dropping in from outer space like ET. No, they are there because of your past performance.

If you have done good work in the past, you have past performance to back you up. If, on the other hand, you have done shoddy work in the past, your past performance will be an obstacle. Either way, your past can make stuff fall out of the clear blue sky—or not.

For marketing purposes, nothing is quite as powerful as word-of-mouth or referrals. If a trusted source gives you a name of say, a carpenter, you are very likely to contact that person. That person has been "cleared." If you call the carpenter to come fix your broken bannister, you are not contacting him out of the clear blue sky. You asked around and found that someone recommended this particular carpenter. For the carpenter, who may have been sitting back that particular day, it felt like he got business fairly easily. He didn't. He earned it, right?

Your past performance can help you earn new business—and it can help keep business away.