

## How to Get Business via Professional, Business, and Trade Organizations

*by Mary Anne Shew*

A common strategy used by businesses to attract clients and customers is to join groups such as chambers of commerce, trade associations, and professional organizations. Yet I have met many people who have been substantially disappointed with the results they have gained from belonging to such groups.

Getting clients from a business group is very different from attracting clients via other kinds of marketing efforts. Certainly any financial commitments you make in terms of advertisements in group publications or event sponsorships gains you the organization's gratitude and some publicity. But that isn't enough. The biggest difference is that personal involvement is required to gain the reputation that attracts business.

As you have probably heard and experienced for yourself, people do business with people they know, they like, and they trust. The kicker is it takes time for that to happen, lots of time, as well as active involvement. Often people leave a group just as they begin to become known and liked, unaware that they are leaving just as it might appear their efforts may start to pay off.

### **Choose Your Groups Wisely**

This may sound basic, but you must choose a group in which members of your target audience are active participants, not just listed on the member list. Check out the group's web site, attend a couple of meetings as a guest, and talk to other members to get a sense of who is active and whether they are a match for your business.

Are you passionate about the group's mission? If not, it will be difficult to build and maintain momentum for a long enough period of time with the group to attract potential clients.

I am not advocating that you walk in and start selling. Instead, initially focus on simply getting acquainted with a few people and gaining a sense of the people who are attracted to the organization. Call a member of the organization's board (or the staff, if there are any) and ask to meet for coffee to talk about the group.

Find out how the group operates, who runs the committees, and who gets things done. Decide on what you want out of involvement in addition to the relationships that may bring you business. Do you want a way to contribute via the skills and knowledge you already have? Do you want to learn something new? Decide on the answers before joining and approaching anyone about volunteering.

### **Act as a Host**

There are lots of other resources that will tell you how to work a room and network at all

types of events and activities, so feel free to Google those phrases for those ideas. My favorite way is to act as a host for the organization when at an event, even if I'm not involved in running it.

I watch for people standing alone and walk over to introduce myself. When in conversation with someone, I'll ask if they had any particular goal in attending such as someone they wanted to meet. If so, I'll try to find a way to bring them together.

## **Get Involved**

Trite as this advice is, it's required to build the reputation necessary for others to know they can rely on you. For example, I rarely recommend someone's services based solely on their reputation. My own reputation rides on the performance of those whom I recommend. Therefore I prefer to have had some level of contact that tells me about them, builds their trustworthiness in my eyes, and familiarizes me with their business.

Whatever your skills or interests, there is at least one group and probably several who would welcome your involvement and commitment with open arms. Volunteer groups always need a steady stream of incoming talent to replace those who have moved on to other interests.

The key is not quantity of time spent with the group but quality. Even if you only have one hour a month to contribute, yet you do it without fail, and your output or results contributes to the organization, you will be valued.

## **Invest for the Long Haul**

Here is a list of the activities that helped me earn paying clients when involved in business organizations:

- Regularly attending the group's main meeting for at least one year, PLUS
- Circulating a lot at those meetings to meet people and get to know their businesses, PLUS
- Participating on a committee that meets regularly (not just attending meetings but taking on assignments), PLUS
- Taking on a board position, PLUS
- Getting on the organization's program schedule in that first year or as soon as possible, and giving an informative, high-value presentation, not a sales pitch.

This strategy has worked in groups as diverse as:

- [National Association of Women Business Owners](#)
- [Product Development and Management Association](#)
- [Webster \(NY\) Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Rochester \(NY\) Small Business Council](#)

- [Rochester \(NY\) Professional Consultants Network](#)

## **Do Unto Others**

Of course, when it comes to doing business, it works both ways. When looking to purchase products or services, do you give first consideration to others you trust in the group?

Consider referring the relevant members of your group to friends or associates who need their products or services. In *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, author Robert Cialdini discusses the rule for reciprocation: When you give something to someone else, it causes a sense of indebtedness in the recipient. Dr. Ivan Misner built a multi-million-dollar company, BNI, completely based on this rule.

## **For Extra Credit**

Additional activities that can help raise awareness about your company include underwriting events or other needs within the group such as covering the cost of newsletter or web site development. Hosting an event at your company (including refreshments) can be a great way to support the group and familiarize people with what your company does.

## **The Bottom Line**

Demonstrate a commitment to the organization and its members, and give other members a variety of ways to get to know you. The rewards will be more than you imagine.