

5 Ways to Break Into Online Networking

By Dr. Ivan Misner

In my book, *The World's Best Known Marketing Secret*, which was written in the mid-90s, I discussed the six types of networks in which you should consider participating: casual-contact networks, strong-contact networks, professional associations, service clubs, social organizations, and women's business organizations. If I were writing that book today, I'd definitely add another network that's grown substantially in the past few years: online networks.

When it comes to online networking, there are several ways to develop your word-of-mouth marketing, but it's important to understand that the foundation of making online networking work for you is the same as with any kind of networking—you've got to develop relationships with trusted business associates. How, then, do you go about developing networking skills, relationships and trust in an online environment? Here are five ways to do it:

- 1. Join one or more online networking communities.** If you're not sure where to start, I'd recommend *Ecademy*. No matter which community you choose however, after joining, you need to participate in whatever way you can to best grow your presence at the site.

Keep in mind that it's not enough to just join and have your name on the membership list. You have to focus on building relationships with the other members of the community. This is a new concept to some; others of you will realize quickly that you can develop real relationships with people you're meeting in cyber space.

So be active in the community. Post topics on threads that deal with your area of expertise. Respond to others' postings on other threads if the subject is at all relevant to your area of expertise. Posting on relevant bulletin boards is a great way to gain visibility, which can lead to credibility and eventually new business. And the more you're seen, interacted with and talked about, the more visibility you'll gain on the site. One note of caution: Don't join too many online networking communities, or you won't be able to be involved effectively enough to build relationships.

Here's another idea: If you're already in a live networking group and then join an online networking group, consider creating a regional or national club or a sub-community online for the members of your offline group. This will just expand the amount of networking you can do within your own organization!

- 2. Start a blog or write a regular column for a website or e-newsletter.** Online networking works best when you get plenty of "hits." If you can start a blog (basically an online diary) on one of the larger blogger sites or online communities, you'll create more buzz for yourself. As people read your content and become familiar with you, they'll feel like they know you, and that's integral to the networking process. Becoming an expert in an area and writing regularly about it can go a long way toward building your online networking opportunities.
- 3. Develop an e-mail newsletter for your own company.** Create an e-mail database of clients, customers and friends, and send them regular content that drives them to your own website. Be sure that your newsletters contain content that has a broad spectrum of interest about your business. You might want to encourage clients and customers to contribute to your content. In doing this, you'll build stronger relationships with them, which in turn will

help you increase the amount of referrals you'll receive.

- 4. Never forget that online networking is still about developing trust.** With online networking, the bottom line is still the same as with live networking. In order to drive business to your company by word of mouth, you must focus on developing real, personal relationships with people. Once you've established that foundation of trust, you'll feel comfortable referring people—and so will your network. The same holds true with online networks, although it may take a bit longer to develop that trust over the internet.

Although there really are no short cuts, technology has made it somewhat more convenient to connect with many more people. That being said, I cannot stress enough that those connections aren't terribly valuable if there isn't trust, respect and friendship being established. One place that teaches this online is www.NetworkingCommunity.com. This website is part of the CoachVille.com community but is open to coaches and non-coaches alike. At NetworkingCommunity.com, they teach people about social capital and networking, and they do it in an online community setting.

- 5. Understand that online networking has its own cultural norms.** It's much easier to get "flamed" online than in face-to-face networking. Let me explain. If you were to ask a total stranger to do business with you in a face-to-face setting, it's pretty difficult for the stranger, because of cultural norms, to respond in an aggressive manner. Mind you, they're still not likely to feel comfortable with your request, but they probably won't act visibly upset.

None of those cultural pretenses exist online, however, and people tend to be much more blunt when responding online than in a face-to-face meeting. With online networking, I think that people feel it's easier to be more direct. The problem is that the response is also more direct and may come across as aggressive or antagonistic. So be careful whom you approach—build a relationship before you ask for someone's business.

Online networking gives you breadth in your networking efforts. It allows you to broaden your reach to anywhere in the world. Just don't forget that trust and relationship building are still as important as ever.

Questions:

It's true that relationship building is especially important in online networking. What are the rules of etiquette that apply specifically to online networking situations?

There are a number of things that apply to online networking, for example, when many people get involved for the first time, they don't realize that when they respond to somebody in upper case, that you're actually screaming at them. I've seen people dialogue back and forth and one person, just for the ease of typing, is doing everything in upper case. They don't realize that is a no-no online. You have to learn what's appropriate or not appropriate for online networking such as the lingo. There are different acronyms that are used regularly and it's quite alright for you to ask, "I'm new online, can you tell me what that means?" People tend to be pretty flexible and understanding when you ask, but you do need to learn what's appropriate and inappropriate for behavior in online networking.

Are there other rules, such as how to build relationships before trying to sell to contacts online?

Whatever you do, don't try to sell right away. It really is a matter of building a relationship. Sometimes it just feels easier because you're not standing face to face with someone to try and close a sale. They're going to have the same reaction frankly that they would have if you were trying to "close" someone without trying to build a relationship in a face-to-face context. As a matter of fact, their reaction may be a little more aggressive. Learn to develop relationships, lay back and observe for a while, don't come in

and start doing direct selling until you've built contacts and connections and have talked about what you do and how you do it for a length of time. Finally, networking is just another way to build personal relationships. You have to remember that it's not a panacea; it's not the answer for building your business. It's one strategy to building your business.

I'm sure somebody who's thinking about getting into online networking is interested to learn: how good the leads are that they might get from online contacts?

It's really important to understand the difference between a lead and a referral. There is a big difference. A lead is a contact and a referral is a connection. A lead is, "Hey, I think there's somebody that may need your service" and a referral is, "Hey, here's somebody that I know definitely needs your service. Let me give you their name and number and you can tell them that I referred you." It's a much warmer connection and it's a much better opportunity to do business.

One of the things I recommend when you're networking, whether it's online or offline, is that you really try to develop referrals, not just leads. With that in mind, it's really important to understand that the quality of the referral is about as good as the relationship you develop. If you develop a good relationship, then you're probably going to develop a good referral. When somebody gives you a referral, they're giving a little bit of their reputation away. If the person does a good job then it enhances their reputation. If the person does a bad job then it hurts their reputation. So people are hesitant to give referrals unless they know you're going to do a good job. That's why it's important to have established that relationship. Just as in live networking, you have to build that relationship to get quality repetitive referrals.

That's really like the VCP model that you've written about in the past -- Visibility leads to Credibility, which in turn will lead to Profitability.

That's right, and when you don't have a face to put with the networking and you're not actually making eye contact, it's a bit more difficult than when it is in person. Not necessarily difficult, but it takes a little longer because you don't have that same kind of personal contact. So you have to go into online networking understanding that it's going to take a little while for you to build the kind of relationships that you need, but you can get great referrals. I've gotten great referrals through online networking and I recommend it highly, but you do have to establish that visibility which leads to credibility and then profitability.

In your experience, are there some businesses for which online networking is best suited?

Yes, there are a few suggestions I have. First of all, there are some obvious ones like people who do online business such as web developers or direct selling online. Those people obviously do well. Also, location is important. If you do business in just one community, it's probably not going to be quite as valuable. The more regional, the more national, the more international the business, the more effective it is going to be for that online networking because when you're online you could just as easily be talking to someone in Malaysia as someone in Chicago. If you're looking for regional or national or international business, then online networking can be very profitable.