

# Networking With Businesses Overseas

By Dr. Ivan Misner

**When it comes to networking with foreign companies, we all speak the language of referrals.**

The idea of growing your business through word-of-mouth marketing is a concept that crosses cultural, ethnic and political boundaries. It resonates within entrepreneurs all over the world. It resonates in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas—because we all speak the language of referrals.

Years ago I began to dissect just what it is about referral marketing that makes it so successful. I determined that the lowest common denominator is that people want referrals! The public wants referrals, the business community wants referrals, everyone seems to want referrals.

As I put together business-development networks or referral groups in many countries around the world over the last two decades, I was frequently told that this type of networking won't work in other countries. It was ironic to hear "this won't work here, we're different" the first time, because it was said by someone in one part of Southern California talking about people who were 25 miles away in another part of Southern California!

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I later came to understand that this person just didn't want to do the hard work necessary to slowly build his referral business. Rather than say, "I don't want to do that," it was easier to say, "We're different here" (even though "here" was only a few miles away from "there").

Over the years I was amazed to come across some people who absolutely refused to follow the tried-and-true fundamentals that were proven to work in generating referrals as I developed networking programs through BNI across the U.S. and later the world. In many cases they used the "we're different" argument or said things like "that won't work here."

When talking about self-development, I have a friend who often says, "When it comes to ourselves, we're always the exception." Everybody else should do what's been proven to work. It seems that the "we're different here" mantra that some people spout actually prevents them from following proven methods of self-development. Only truly successful people understand that everyone who has achieved success has succumbed to the basics.

## **Building a Personal Network of Trust**

If you want to build relationships that generate referrals, you have to take the time to gain trust and credibility within your network. Here are a few basic networking lessons you should keep in mind when building relationships with foreign—and local—businesses:

- Whether you like it or not, you do become part of a network, so make sure you leave a good impression.
- Maintain and cultivate your network—even if only by sending holiday cards every year. Encourage people to visit and stay with you whenever they're in your area.

- When seeking to use your network for information or advice, try to empower individuals in your network to feel that by helping you they're helping someone else.
- Be prepared to quickly build rapport and to reinforce the positive expectations people have been given by their contacts.
- Be cross-culturally aware.

The value of having your personal network of trust applies wherever you operate. It's particularly valuable in areas such as the Far East, where the culture of the community requires you to take time to build a trusting and mutually respectful relationship first.

My experience has shown that people in any entrepreneurial economy can use a networking system to improve their business. If this system is done within the cultural context and not outside it, I've found that the same networking concepts and techniques are almost completely transferable from one country to another. It's basically due to the truth that business is business when it comes to relationship marketing, no matter the culture, ethnicity or political persuasion. It's true that people are different around the world, but normally all businesspeople want to conduct business more effectively. When the goal is to harness the power of relationship marketing, driving businesses further and faster through business-to-business networking can be an effective result.

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### **Questions:**

*"We all speak the language of referrals" but are there some cultural differences of which a businessperson needs to be aware before they begin to network internationally?*

Yes, there definitely are cultural differences. One of the first differences you will run into is the use of slang. It's amazing how much slang gets into our dialogue when we're talking to other people. I remember being on the telephone with a business associate from New York and a gentleman from Africa. In this conference call we told him, "We'll keep you in the loop on this." There was silence on the phone and he said, "Okay, thanks." I didn't think much of it, but about two weeks later he calls me back and said, "I finally figured out what you meant when you said you were going to keep me in the loop!" I realized I've been doing business internationally long enough now that I should know not to use slang! I said, "I'm sorry, I guess you don't use that expression there in Africa." He said, "Oh, no, we use that expression." I said, "Uh oh, what does it mean there in Africa?" He said, "You and your associate told me you were going to keep me pregnant." I had to explain to him that was absolutely not our intention and then I apologized for the use of the slang.

But it's that kind of thing that can really get you into trouble. When you're speaking internationally be careful not to use those terms and phrases that are used in your country but might have a completely different connotation elsewhere. You have to be careful.

*So a businessperson needs to be mindful of figures of speech or colloquialisms that they use. Are there some other cultural differences of which people ought to be aware?*

Some of the simple ones are hand gestures, how you move your hands. I learned this the hard way while I was in Malaysia doing a training seminar. I was trying to make a point and struck my fist in the palm of my other hand. I discovered that this is a very, very bad gesture in Malaysia, as I watched the blood drain from the faces of everyone in the entire audience.

You need to find out those simple things. One of the things that I've learned is that people want to do business through referrals. If you can work through the cultural differences, there's a natural yearning to do business this way. There are web sites such as [www.executiveplanet.com](http://www.executiveplanet.com) where you can find out about cultural differences, so you can be prepared as you go and work with individuals in other countries.

*Have you run into any other differences in your own personal experience as you have developed BNI around the world?*

Yes, many. One that really stands out is whenever you're doing business in Asia, something as simple as the way you hand out your business card becomes very important. In western culture, particularly the United States or North America, you can pull your business card out of your back pocket and nonchalantly hand your business card over to somebody. But in most Asian countries it is actually a bit of a ritual. You take your card out, hold the tips of the card in both of your hands and you bow while you hand over your card. If you just hand it over casually it's something of an insult.

If you learn the simple techniques that are applicable to the particular country that you're doing business in, you can get past the cultural stuff. We all speak the language of referrals whether we're white or black or Christian or Jewish or Muslim. It doesn't matter what religion, what race, what country. The U.S., Canada, Malaysia, New Zealand—we all speak the language of referrals. We all want to refer one another and build relationships based on trust. It is something I have seen that transcends cultural differences all around the world.

*You've talked about how these business basics apply to any country. What about those countries that are just beginning to become entrepreneurial?*

That's a great question and it's very applicable. When I say any country, what I really mean is any country that has an entrepreneurial economy. When I first started BNI, I was actually quite surprised at how well this worked in other countries, but all of those countries had an entrepreneurial economy.

I had an opportunity a number of years ago to have lunch with Brian Tracey, a world renowned trainer and business expert. We were talking about doing business internationally and I knew that he did seminars and trainings in Germany. He speaks several languages, and he does his trainings in Germany in German. I asked him at lunch, "Brian, when you do your trainings in German, do you change any of the materials to fit the cultural differences of the country?" He said, "Not a word. I don't change a single word." I said, "How do you explain that because clearly there are cultural differences between Germany and America and other countries?" He said to me, "Businesspeople all around the world want to do things more effectively and more efficiently. They want to do it faster and they want to do it better. And if I can teach them how to run their business faster and more effectively, they are going to apply those techniques and they will work within their cultural context."

It really does transcend the cultural differences if you teach people how to do things better. I think that's what we're talking about here with word-of-mouth networking and with referrals. If we can teach people how to generate referrals more effectively, and to do it quicker if at all possible, it will transcend those cultural differences. Brian Tracey's experience is very much the experience that I've had in taking BNI to dozens of entrepreneurial countries all around the world.