



Selling Through Our Network

- When new customers turn up on their own

When starting out as entrepreneurs, our personal networks are extremely critical. It is through our network that we not only get information, which helps us start and develop our companies, but also our first customers. Can we maintain and grow our network as a continual source of new customers?

Entrepreneurs are in a constant state of networking. In fact, it is probably impossible to become a good entrepreneur without this essential skill. Often when we start our companies, it is through our network that we meet our business partners; find our first suppliers; initial staff; and possibly even our board of directors. It is also often through our networks that we decide to take our company international. Expanding our ambitions to a new market can be based on a network contact that makes us feel comfortable and confident enough to aspire towards the greater challenge.

There are a variety of network relationships that prove valuable to our companies. The best networks for our business are inevitably the ones that positively affect our company's bottom line. So, how do we go about creating or expanding this kind of network to our advantage?

Be known for something good

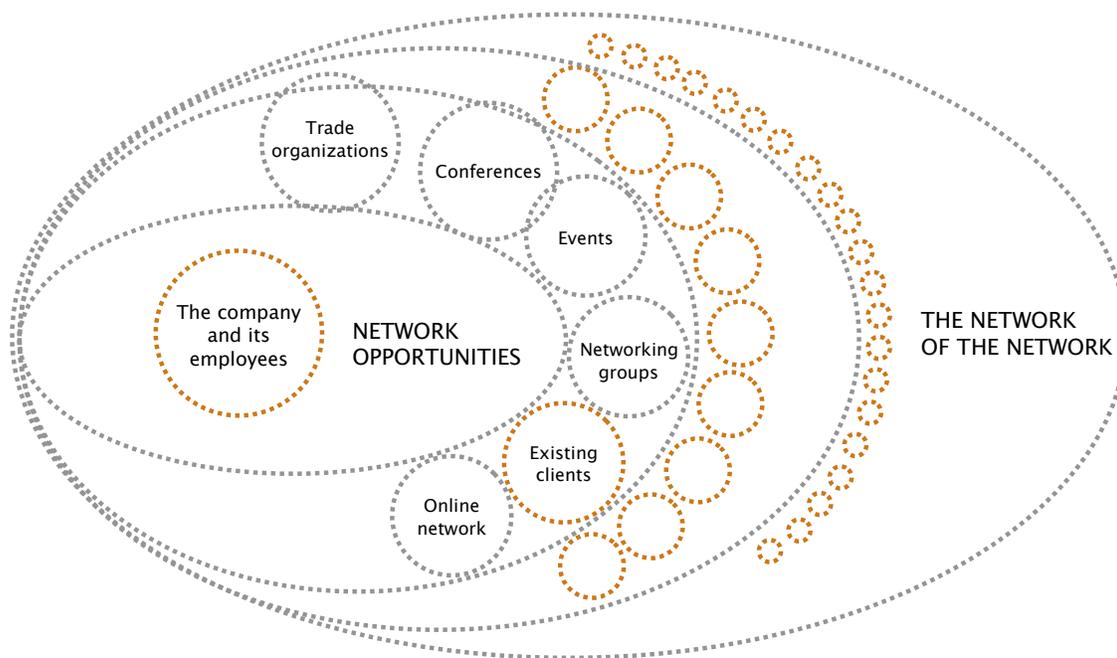
When we sell through our networks it is usually an easier path to sales. Often, someone from our network has in some way mentioned us, our company, our products or services in positive terms. Suddenly, someone we have never heard of before is contacting us to learn more about or to buy what we offer. All with minimum effort on our part.

For this reason alone it is advantageous to have a good network, but in the case of networks, size too matters. The number of people we know, or perhaps rather, the number of people that know us, can have a direct impact on the number of customers we have. After having run a business for a couple of years, many entrepreneurs experience the positive phenomenon of gaining customers based on word of mouth. They move from initially having to contact each potential customer to suddenly having people contact them based on referrals.

The easiest sale

The best aspects of selling through our networks is that it is the easiest, cheapest and most genuine way of selling. Network sales take a clear first place for ease, closely followed by repeat sales to existing customers. Both are easy compared to the efforts involved in trying to sell to first timers, those customers who have never heard of us before. The best thing, of course, is to be known for something good that brings positive focus to you and your company and inspires people to spread the word. This method also improves our credibility in a way we could never do through our own branding and marketing efforts. Networking should, in other words, be an integral element in our sales

Network Ripples: Access to new clients in the second link of the network



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tasks. The time used deciding how and when to cultivate networks is time well spent.

Out of the office and online

Networks are everywhere and you cannot really pinpoint any specific place to find and develop your network. Both private and professional networks can be the source of your next customer. One place, however, that you will not find a network is behind the doors of your own office. Networks are about being present in various situations. If you are interested in professionally developing your network then it is important to consider different possibilities. One way is to get involved in different networks as a means of expanding and impacting your professional network. Some of these network opportunities are presented in the model on this page, titled Network Ripples. It contains memberships of branch unions, conference participation or social/academic/professional network groups, event participation (i.e. receptions) or perhaps, even your own individual network initiatives.

Existing customers can also be the source of new networks by introducing us to new customers that we may initially have overlooked. Future customers are not only found in our existing network, but more likely in “the second link” (our extended network) which is what makes online

networking so interesting. Sites such as LinkedIn.com give us the opportunity to connect with our network’s networks and to ask for introductions to the contacts and companies that we seek in growing our individual network.

Even more useful are the online portals for finding

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networks of which we were previously unaware. This can be done by doing a specific search to find out, who in your extended network is in a specific field or geographic market. A search for “Canada” will quickly uncover anyone presently in our extended network, who is based in or connected to Canada. This search, for example, could present several contacts in Toronto that may be of assistance as we try to gather marketing or research information for the area. If good contacts are willing to write a letter of introduction, we can more easily make a call to unfamiliar future contacts. Who knows, maybe that new Canadian contact even happens to know a potential customer or two.

Emotional barriers

Although there is clearly great advantage to creating new network relations; many entrepreneurs still have

reservations about networking. One reason is that we do not want to be perceived as pushy, and often associate networking with aggressive selling, despite the two being quite different. Another common barrier, when it comes to networking, is related to our own personal insecurities. Do I have something intelligent to say? Can I be engaging enough to maintain someone's interest? Another aspect of this is our concern that people will not be interested in our company, our products or our services. One way to eliminate this uncomfortable feeling is to focus less on yourself and more on the needs of the person with whom you are speaking. In fact, it is not even necessary to focus on selling yourself to be good at networking. It is quite the opposite.

Focus on others

Shifting your focus outside of yourself will both help you feel more comfortable in a given social situation and get you in the kind of mindset that will allow you to get the most out of your network. Oddly enough there is quite a bit of truth in the expression, "what goes around comes around." When we do something for someone else, we often reap the benefits of our efforts later. We never forget the person that introduced us to a new and important connection. However, how do you practically go about helping others in your network? One method is by asking simple questions such as "So, what are you working on at the moment?" as opposed to the more demanding questions, "What do you do?" or "Where is your company heading?" By asking a question that is relatively easy to answer yet interesting and relevant, to everyone, you increase the value of your communication.

When someone tells us what they are currently working on, it provides us with an opportunity to find information or contacts that can be immediately useful and appropriate for the situation. Other good questions that can be used when networking relate to values and personal opinions. As we develop our networks it is important to remember that just as we should ask others about their needs, it is equally important to express our own needs. So, when someone initiates a conversation by asking you how it is going, you can extend your repertoire from "things are fine" to "It's going great, and currently we are working on....." By naming an actual challenge, we give our contacts a chance to actually help, instead of simply leaving them with the impossible task of guessing what they can do to assist us.

From mere contacts to customer relations

Meeting new contacts, having good conversations and learning about each others mutual needs does not, however, guarantee long term customer relationships or sales. The foundation for a valuable and therefore useful network is primarily based on trust. This trust gives our networks the confidence to recommend us to others. Trust, however, is not the only important aspect of our customer relationship.

To be helped we must first be remembered. This is why it is important for us to also constantly maintain our networks. The best way to do this is to follow up on initial contact with telephone calls, meetings, email or snail mail.

A good habit to develop is forwarding interesting articles to relevant parties in your network, who would appreciate reading them. The recipients may not have come across the article and it shows that you are keeping them in mind. In many cases it is just a matter of a simple click for you to send online articles or tip a friend on some interesting virtual content.

Another good habit is connecting your contacts with relevant parties. This can be especially useful when you are presented with a business card that is not really useful to you. You, simply think of a person in your network that might have use of the contact, write a short introduction on the back and send it to them.

Another good general networking tip is to always make a note of the person's interests or needs on the back of their business card. A business card without notes can quickly become a worthless piece of paper among a stack of similar cards. If more and more people integrate these good networking skills it will encourage others to do the same and improve the level and the size of our networks over time.

"Marketing should not be seen as an expense, but rather as a way to create earnings, because when marketing works, we attract new customers and get more orders."

The joy of a good network

Networking is essential for entrepreneurs because it is often through this activity that our customers find us in the first place. However, a network is not only about the bottom line. The most important aspect of our networks is probably what occurs on a personal level such as when we meet people and build long term relationships with them that extend beyond business activities. Our networks are a great opportunity to meet many likable, creative, original and enthusiastic people. This is especially true among the entrepreneur network itself and this alone makes it worthwhile to discover new networking opportunities now and in the future.

Suggestions for the next step

- Make a list of you network opportunities and evaluate which are the most relevant.
- Get ideas of how you can better assist and meet the needs of your existing network.
- Express your current needs to your network and ask for references to others that you need to meet now.

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