

Chapter 13

Forget Cold Calls!

■■■ **Dislike cold calls?** Instead of spending endless hours making calls that go nowhere, why not spend your time networking, generating referrals and forming alliances -- and watch your income GROW!

Today, it's **almost impossible to get business by cold calling** and very often the process can become a waste of your time and energy. A smarter and more effective approach for promotional products professionals is to **build your business through networking, referrals and alliances. And it's easier than you realize.**

When I started in business, I made it a habit to **build networking into my calendar on a monthly basis.** I never missed a monthly event. Soon, I was calling on some of the largest companies in my area and had a thriving business. Did I always meet the right person at networking events? No, but I did meet others who *could* connect me with the right person.

Today, I belong to several trade associations and chambers of commerce. I join committees and make sure I'm a visible presence at meetings and special events. It's a great way to expand my network and let others know how I can help them.

The Promo Biz Coach's Networking, Referral and Alliance-Building Strategies

Network on fertile ground

What organizations do the people you are trying to reach belong to? One savvy distributor joined a healthcare trade association and was the only promotional products sales person there. She made wonderful contacts and her name has been passed onto others in the healthcare field. Whom are you targeting? Make it a habit to research the associations that they belong to.

Attend networking events on a monthly basis

Networking has received some bad press lately, because many people simply don't know proper networking etiquette. **Go with the goal in mind of helping people, rather than seeing how many business cards you can collect. *Think win-win.*** Look for ways to exchange business ideas that can be mutually beneficial. Ask your networking contacts what a good business lead for them would be, *before* you start talking about yourself.

People respond in kind to others who want to help them. If you're feeling uncomfortable about attending networking events, this is a great way to get the other person talking. **Have a small promotional product with you that you can give with your business card, such as a Post-it™ pad or unique pen or magnet.** Show that you believe in what you sell.

Look for networking events that allow tabletop presentations for free or for a nominal fee - this is a great way to spotlight what you do best.

Give back

Volunteer to be a greeter at the door of the next event you attend. This is an easy way to meet the most number of people in a short amount of time. The best places to network are your local chamber of commerce, small trade associations or organized groups like Le Tip International (www.letip.com) and Business Networking International (BNI) (www.bni.com).

Don't forget that networking need not be formal. I've networked with people standing next to me in a supermarket line or on an elevator. You never know whom you are going to meet. Besides, it may give you a chance to practice your 30-second commercial. (See Chapter 8 for more about how to develop your own 30-second commercial.)

Help others

See how you can best help others, and often the favor will be returned. *Think reciprocity!* You'll be a big hit with everyone you meet at a business function if you start by being a great listener and finding out how you can best help others grow *their* businesses.

Follow up within 24 hours

A drawer filled with business cards won't do you any good. As soon as you get back to the office, **sort the business cards you received into three piles: hot, warm and cool prospects. Stand out from the competition by following up on all good prospects**

within 24 hours. A friendly phone call, a “nice meeting you” note or some follow-up information will keep your name at the ‘top of mind.’

Put everyone you meet in your contact management database. Keep in contact with your prospects via email, fax or snail mail. Find out how they prefer to be reached. Send regular information on special promotions and strategies to help promote their businesses.

Reach out to referral partners

Who regularly comes in contact with the people you most want to reach, but is not a direct competitor? **Referral partners are people who serve the same markets you do, but aren’t direct competitors.** Examples of good referral partners for the promotional products industry are:

- Meeting planners
- Printers
- Trade-show display companies
- Graphic designers
- Convention and visitors bureaus

These are the people who routinely come in contact with buyers that need promotional items. Look for these types of businesses in your area by searching the Internet or your local phone directory. Take the time to make contact with the principal people at these companies and see how you can best support each other.

INSIDER Information

Amazing Results!

Angela and Ivy Oliver are the savvy mother and daughter owners of a promotional products distributorship, **Hoopla Headquarters**, in Austin, Texas. They recently formed a **strategic partnership** with a local digital printer that produced amazing results.

The digital printer wanted to grab a bigger piece of the pie in the highly competitive printing industry, while Hoopla Headquarters wanted to expand its customer base. Hoopla Headquarters supported the printer’s efforts by providing

promotional themes, ideas and products that showcased the printer as a new and innovative printing company.

When a major client of the digital printer needed promotional products in a pinch, Hoopla Headquarters was able to come through. Now, with the newly created synergy clients can get all of their printed materials done under one roof. And each partner benefits and makes more money.

Both companies teamed up recently to host an open house with an impressive turnout, generating a tremendous amount of new business leads and referrals for all involved. **Now that's what I call a win-win situation!**

Ask for referrals

Your current customers can be a great source of referrals for you. At the end of every sales call, ask your contact if anyone else in the company can use your services. Make sure your customers understand the full range of services you can provide -- from safety programs to awards and gifts to customer-retention programs and trade show traffic builders. Most large organizations have more than one buyer of promotional products. Smaller companies may only have one buyer, but they can refer you to other businesses.

Provide excellent service

It goes without saying that when **you provide excellent service, your customers will want to refer business to you.** They'll be so pleased about what you did for them, that they will be eager to recommend you to their colleagues and friends. There is no better way to build a business than 'word-of-mouth' marketing. Your customers will do the selling for you.

Form strategic alliances

Reach out to large organizations whose members would use your services. For example, one smart promotional products professional aligned herself with a trade association and gave its members a small discount for using her services. In exchange she received free advertising in the association's newsletter and other marketing materials and the opportunity to make contact with all of its members.

INSIDER Information

I am a member of my local convention and visitor's bureau. There is a membership fee, but it has proven to be well worth the investment. I have received tens of thousands of dollars worth of business from them, as well as countless referrals to organizations that are visiting my city.

Become active in your community

Being involved in your community is a great way to become known and grow your business. People like to refer business to others who are helping in the community. Look for organizations that support your beliefs. Consider joining or volunteering at organizations like the Rotary, Lions Club or Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Join your **local chamber of commerce**. Not only will others learn about your business but also it will help your public image, increase your networking opportunities and allow you to help influence local business decisions.

Form your own Mastermind group or advisory board

You don't have to run a big business to have an **advisory board or start a Mastermind group**. Seek out others who have been successful in business to exchange ideas and leads. Invite people you would like to be on your advisory board to breakfast or lunch. Plan meetings on a monthly basis to see how you can best support each other's success.

Become a public speaker

Organizations in your community are always looking for interesting speakers. **Seek out speaking engagements at organizations that have members in your target market.** Volunteer to present a program on business promotion.

Good sources for speaking engagements are your chamber of commerce, Rotary Clubs and other service organizations that have monthly meetings. Also, consider **speaking at conferences and trade shows that are attended by your target audience.** I regularly speak at promotional products industry trade shows because my target audience for business coaching is distributors.

It's true, public speaking isn't for everyone, but if you think you'd like to give it a try, consider brushing up on your speaking skills by joining an organization like

Toastmasters International (www.toastmasters.org.)

* Parts of this article originally appeared in *Advantages Magazine* and is reprinted with permission from the Advertising Specialty Institute®.

INSIDER INFORMATION

I have formed several alliances - one with a local printer, another with a meeting and event planning company and a third with a graphic designer. Each of us can present ourselves as 'full-service' and has increased our bottom lines as a result.

► *What Can You Do Now?* ◀

- Make time for **networking** on your calendar and attend meetings on a weekly basis.
- Research and contact possible **referral partners**.
- Look for opportunities to **form alliances** with organizations that can use your services.