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Counselors to America's Small Business



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Use Networking to Build Business Visibility

By Michael J. Scott, Chairman of SCORE Ventura County Chapter

Word-of-mouth is the most effective form of marketing. But people can't spread the word about you and your small business if they don't know you.

That's where networking comes in. Whether it's through a professional association for your industry, a local business group, or your Chamber, networking offers a valuable forum for prospective customers and colleagues to learn about you and the services or products you provide.

Successful networking is more than simply exchanging introductions and business cards, then waiting for someone to call. In fact, professional marketing coach Charlie Cook at www.charliecook.net says that most people waste the few precious moments they have with new and existing contacts by focusing on themselves.

"It's better to spend most of that time asking questions and collecting information," he says. "Then you can make quick assessments as to whether they would have any interest in the solutions you provide."

Cook recommends that every entrepreneur should have a succinct "elevator speech"—a 30-

second description of the problems his or her business solves. After that, the focus of the networking conversations should be entirely on other people: their primary business concerns, problems they want solved, and unmet business needs. As the conversations unfold, you may find areas that overlap with the solutions you provide.

"If not, you can still make an impression by referring them to other people in your network who can help," Cook says. "They'll see you as a problem solver, and be more likely provide you with referrals in return."

Networking also doesn't end with the conversation. Cook recommends maintaining a data file of networking information (several software programs are available to track networking contacts), and updating it as soon as possible after every contact.

"Make note of their interests, what you've shared with them, and when to contact them next," he says, adding that regular follow-ups are essential. "People have short memories and may forget that you exist and more importantly, that you're the best person to help them with their business needs and problems.

Finally, while valuable business contacts can happen anytime and anywhere; don't leave your strategy to chance. "Identify the people you want to make contact with, whether prospects or potential marketing alliance partners,

and make carefully researched efforts to build relationships," Cook says. "This approach takes more time on your part, but it gets results."

For more advice on crafting marketing strategies and tactics for your small business, contact SCORE "Counselors to America's Small Business." 805-204-6022. or make an appointment right here at the **Malibu Chamber, for one a month FREE counseling.**

Please call 310-456-9025 for a free, confidential one on one business counseling session. Visit SCORE's website at www.scoreventura.org for complete details on low cost workshops and on-site mentoring.