



Illustration: Paul Gilligan

# SURFING THE OTHER NET

## THE POWER OF NETWORK MARKETING

Referrals will always be the No. 1 way to get new business, but networking is the best of the rest

BY KARA KURYLOWICZ

**H**ow does contractor Dan Robinson build his business? He takes six to eight hours away from sawing and hammering every week to sit around and talk to people. That hardly sounds like a way to grow a business, but Robinson says this approach has been key to building his three-year-old firm, Restorcon Contracting, from the ground up.

"Networking requires a lot time and effort, but it works because people do business with other people," says Toronto-based Robinson, who is a member of several networking groups, including Business Network International (BNI), a worldwide, 21-year-old business and professional networking and referral organization with chapters across Canada. "I'm building relationships, not selling my services."

Networking is a learned skill according to Robinson, a member of BNI's West End Business Builders Chapter, the Etobicoke Chamber of Commerce and Pride Business Networking. Now in the habit of looking out for networking opportunities wherever he goes, Robinson also credits BNI with helping him acquire a variety of networking techniques, such as creating his 60-second infomercial and company tagline/slogan.

"Givers gain—if I help people in any way—it will come back to me," says Robinson, whose tagline is Quality Construction Is No Accident. "I may refer a client, a supplier or share a great idea."

"Good networking is a mutually beneficial exchange," says Donna Messer, author of *Effective Networking Strategies* and president of ConnectUs Communications Canada, a business-matching firm in Oakville, Ont. "It can't be one-sided; it has to work both ways."

Symbiosis is a key to networking success, but so is consistency. Joining a group and then showing up just a few times a year probably won't work. You have to get your face in front of people regularly to develop a comfort level and remain top-of-mind.

Few associations insist you show up, but BNI is an exception. BNI members must attend weekly breakfast meetings that typically start around 7 a.m. Members who miss more than three meetings without sending a substitute may have their memberships revoked.

That commitment may seem excessive, but BNI has its reasons. "If you miss a week or two, you're out-of-sight, out-of-mind," says Robinson, who always arrives in his branded truck, his company-logged jackets and shirts and plenty of business cards.

In most cases, your networking investments, whether at your local homebuilders' association, chamber of commerce, board of trade or Rotary Club, may not produce measurable returns for many months, if not years. Every so often, a contract or a lead will result from a single event you attended, or a person you met just once, but that's the exception rather than the rule. If you're into immediate gratification, networking, particularly the more formal variety, may not work for you.

## Get over it

**UNFORTUNATELY, NETWORKING HAS BECOME** a dirty word because it tends to conjure up images of strangers making nice while frantically exchanging business cards they will never need.

Lots of people say they hate networking, but if they do, that emotion may be reflected in their attitude or approach at events.

Dan Robinson of Restorcon Contracting wasn't crazy about it when he first started, but education and practice have improved both his networking ability and his comfort level. Best of all, it's made him a more effective networker and, as an added bonus, he now has fun doing it.

"Be open to new people and building relationships everywhere you go," says Donna Messer, author of *Effective Networking Strategies* and president of ConnectUs Communications Canada in Oakville, Ont. "The more you do it, the easier it will get."

Messer says you can improve your attitude towards networking, whether it's in a business or social environment, by embracing this basic premise: I'm here to meet people and get to know them. As soon as you decide you're there to connect with people rather than sell your product or service, the pressure is off and you'll start to relax.

Another barrier to networking is shyness. If shyness is your issue, here's a news flash: few people find it easy to go up and start conversations with strangers. So take comfort in the fact you're not alone. We're all petrified that we'll be the lone wallflower and many of us are still scared that someone, or no one, will like us. But Messer puts a new spin on that: "It's not dislike – it's that you're not like each other," she says. "So look for the things that you have in common. We all tend to like people who are like us and with whom we have things in common."

## Networking don'ts

**DON'T TALK TO THE PEOPLE** you already know! You're here to meet new people. Greet them, chat for one minute and then go talk to someone that you don't know.

Also, never spend more than 10 minutes talking to someone you've just met. Yes, it's easy to spend the entire event with this person, but that would be cheating. Go and talk to someone you haven't met.

While Robinson networks two or three times a week in his groups, he also taps into more casual opportunities everywhere, all the time. For example, he might chat with someone at a party or standing in line to get a cup of coffee.

"In social situations, people invariably ask each other what they do and conversation follows from there," says Robinson. "You need to constantly meet new people."



Doug Robinson, Restorcon Contracting

"We're in the relationship business as much as we're in the construction business," says Allan Klassen, president and managing partner of Albi Homes Ltd. in Calgary. "Networking contributes to the future stability of Albi, because everyone wants to deal with individuals and firms with similar values and cultures, whether they're clients, suppliers, partners or employees."

Like Robinson, Klassen never leaves home without business cards in hand and pen in pocket. Klassen also volunteers with industry and construction associations and supports community initiatives and charities. Of course, he cares about these organizations and their causes, but they also help him connect with a wide variety of people who may become clients, employees, suppliers or partners.

"You never know who you'll meet who might change your life," says Klassen, who always presents a professional appearance because he represents Albi wherever he is. "I'm networking 24/7. I enjoy people and getting to know them, whether or not they may one day benefit my business. That keeps it genuine and people sense that."

"Networking isn't what you do for a living—it's what you do for your life," says Messer.

"The industry has blessed me beyond my dreams," adds Klassen, who met his wife while networking. "Ask yourself how you can make a difference. I tell people to give me a call if they need anything. Most think you're too busy so they don't take you up on it, but I am happy to help wherever I can." **CC**

# 13 tips for contractors who hate networking

- 1** Have plenty of business cards.
- 2** Write a 30-second and a 60-second infomercial for your business. Focus on what makes you and your firm different or special. Tell people what they'll get if they decide to hire you. Answer the "what's in it for me?" question. Target your infomercial to specific groups, such as seniors or young couples with children. Then practice your infomercial until you are confident with it.
- 3** Run through a list of questions you can use to initiate a conversation, such as "Have you been to one of these events before?", "How did you get into this field?", and "What do you do when you're not at work?" Listen to the responses your questions garner.
- 4** Plan your conversation exit strategies. You can excuse yourself for a washroom break. You can say, "I see someone I know—can I introduce you?" or "It was great meeting you—I look forward to reconnecting. Can I have your card?"
- 5** Think about how much you want to grow your business this year. Ponder the type of clients you'd like and the types of jobs you want. Write down those goals and figure out where you might meet that kind of person.
- 6** Make eye contact.
- 7** Smile. It makes you appear open and approachable. If the person smiles back, say, "Hi." Shake hands. Introduce yourself. Do your infomercial.
- 8** Ask questions. Effective networkers listen more than they talk and when they speak, it's often to ask a question. While they answer, formulate your next question, but make sure you're really listening as well.
- 9** Find out how you can help them. Then tell them what you need.
- 10** Ask for a card and offer your card.
- 11** Tell the person that you're making a note about their needs on the card and you will follow up.
- 12** Put your exit strategy to work.
- 13** Move on and introduce yourself to someone new.