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smart **Advice for Success!** Business™ matters

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Making Connections

Plan to include more time to network with fellow professionals and potential clients this year.



Business may be “busier” than ever, but don’t allow yourself to be trapped indefinitely in your office. Get out from behind your desk and talk to managers, employees, fellow professionals, existing clients, and new clients. Resolve to expand your business and social circles in the upcoming year by including regular networking time in your schedule.

Join a group or two. Visit a few local networking and industry groups, mingle with the members, and choose a group that best suits you and best meets your needs. Some groups meet on a weekly or monthly basis while others may have fewer meetings in a year. Some are more lead-oriented and may place a limit on the amount of members that can represent one field. Groups such as this can offer the opportunity to be the only business provider in your industry, but you should also be prepared to spend time generating leads for others in your group. Some are regional and may include a variety of fields, but place no limits on the number of members. You may have some competition in the room, but there is likely to be a deeper pool of potential clients and there may be more scheduled time to network. Joining an industry group can also help build business. You may get invaluable advice from networking with others in your industry or combine forces with another professional to land a larger joint project, branch out in a new direction, or put pressure on common suppliers for better service or lower costs.

Attend a conference. Conferences can be a great way to make new business contacts across the country and across the globe. Attend a conference to pick up some new skills or learn about current trends in your industry, but also plan to make a few new contacts with

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Make Your Website More Productive

Three Survey Questions for Quick Feedback



If you want to improve your website and increase web sales, but can't afford web analytics tools to measure customer response to your site, try a short website survey. In his blog, *Occam's Razor*, Avinash Kaushik recommends including at least three questions in your survey.

Why are you here today? Ask the purpose of your customer's visit to your website, or what task they are looking to accomplish. This will provide you with information on why people are visiting your website and what they hope to achieve by doing so. That way, you can better tailor your website to meet the variety of needs your customers cite.

Were you able to complete your task today? If customers are unable to complete their task, you'll know immediately if your site is not working up to its full potential. This question will eliminate some of the guesswork involved in analyzing data to determine whether your visitors had their needs met or questions answered.

If you were unable to complete your task, why not? Ask your customers how you can improve your website to enable them to meet their needs. This question allows the customer to directly tell you how you can improve your site to help them accomplish their mission. Listen to your customers' reasons for being stymied and their suggestions on how to adjust your site to make the visit quick and pleasurable.

Think of more questions you can add to get the information you want. You might also want to ask customers about their overall experience, if they had difficulty completing their task, or what they would like to see changed on the website. This will provide input on whether your site needs a few minor tweaks or a major overhaul. For those of you with more time or resources, longer surveys and/or web analysis may be optimal, but don't discount the power of a few simple questions. It is certainly better than doing nothing at all.

For more information on Avinash Kaushik's article and reader feedback, visit www.kaushik.net/avinash/2007/04/the-three-greatest-survey-questions-ever.html.

Building a survey

You can either build a survey on your website, or you can use a survey service - either with a voluntary link on your site or using a web popup. (Note: A popup can detract from the user experience or be blocked.) Some survey resources are free or low cost.

For starters, check out www.surveymonkey.com or www.surveyconsole.com.

Looking for a daily marketing fix?

Check out Marketing Profs Daily Fix on the web at www.mpdailyfix.com.

BACK IT UP!

Is your information, and your business at risk? Theft, natural disasters, fires, broken water pipes, computer failure, viruses, and errors can torpedo your computer data and leave you scrambling to access critical information. The Small Business Administration noted that 85% of small businesses that lose their data close their doors within 18 months. Be sure to backup your computer data frequently, and store that data in secure locations on and off site. There are so many ways to back up your data. DVDs, CDs, external hard drives, memory sticks, and external servers are a few. If you haven't done a backup, assess your computer system and files and back up your data, documents, financial information, applications, contact list, database - the information you take for granted will always be at your fingertips. Then create and keep a backup schedule and continue with daily, weekly, and yearly backups.

I Resolve to ...

Year-end is a great time to take stock of the past year and lay plans for the New Year. Here are seven tips to get you started!

Run a Financial Check-Up - Are you where you had hoped to be financially for the year? Check your Profit and Loss, Income, and Expense Reports. Review your sales reports to determine the more profitable areas of business and areas where sales were sub par. Create a plan for increasing business in more profitable areas during the coming year. Either prepare to eliminate less profitable ventures, channels, or market segments or create plans to increase their profitability.

Prepare a Budget - Examine your projected budget and actual expenses for the year. Prepare a budget for the new year, and resolve to stick to it! Factor in expenses for computer and software updates and purchases of new equipment. Be sure to allow for changes in your marketing strategy for the upcoming year. Prepare a list of areas to cut if profits or cash flow start running below expectations and a list of contingent opportunities to add or increase if cash flow runs higher.

Plan to Succeed - Businesses that fail to plan, plan to fail. Create that fresh business plan you've been thinking about. Or, if your financial check-up shows variances, fine-tune your existing business plan for the coming year. Set aside some quality time in January to lay the groundwork for future sales.

Create a Marketing Plan - Evaluate your marketing mix for the past year, and make changes for the better for the coming year. Freshen up your marketing message and strategy. Are you consistently getting the right message out to the public, or do you find your strategy and materials are sending out mixed messages?

Update the Database - Review your database, updating information as needed. Renew contact with lapsed customers, and touch base with your existing customers. Ask for more referrals from some of your best customers; connecting their associates' business with yours is a win-win situation. It is a quick and inexpensive way to increase business.

Review Staff - Identify staff behaviors and accomplishments that should be acknowledged or even rewarded. Also, identify those whose behaviors or work need to be addressed and improved. Everyone wants feedback on how they are doing. If you have difficulty remembering pertinent examples, schedule a few minutes each day or week to update notes (both positive and negative) for performance reviews for each of your direct reports.

Learn Something New - Resolve to update or improve your professional skills. Take a class or plan to read a book or two in an area in which you feel you could use more training.

Eliminating products or services? Let affected customers know the reasons and provide alternatives (even a competitor) for their needs. Some of these customers may also purchase from your more profitable areas now or in the future, so do not alienate them or adversely affect your reputation.

Holiday Checklist

Are you prepared for the holidays? Here are a few "to-dos" for the coming months.

- Send holiday cards to customers** – Take time to acknowledge your customers during the holidays. Send a card of good quality and add a handwritten note of thanks for their business.
- Purchase purposeful gifts for clients** – Well thought-out gifts to valued customers are a great way to say thank you, keep your business relationships strong, and keep you in your customers' thoughts in the coming months. If possible, customize gifts to your clients' tastes or give useful items that will keep you on their minds.
- Give a small gift to potential clients** – A small gift to potential clients will keep your business front and center for the coming year.
- Don't forget your employees** – If you normally give holiday bonuses or a party, it should be in your yearly budget. Many employees count on a bonus for their holiday spending, so you may want to distribute it early.
- Decorate your business** – Decorations should add to, not detract from your merchandising.

other attendees while you're there, and then continue that contact via e-mail, telephone, or over a cup of coffee.

Network in social settings.

Networking can be fun. Don't limit yourself to networking groups and conferences. Network while you go to the gym, stand in line at the grocery, attend a holiday or cocktail party, or pursue a hobby or activity you enjoy. You never know where your next lead will come from, so expand your networking beyond people you know or plan to get to know and make an effort to get to know the person who happens to be in front of you.

Set aside a few minutes a day to strengthen and expand your network. A few minutes a day is all it takes to stay in touch with the people in your database.

Executives who spend a few minutes a day calling or e-mailing colleagues, vendors, and other business associates have an advantage. Networking can provide business leads, and keep informed about current trends. It's also a great method to fill a vacancy in your company or help out your associates.

It's Time to Recharge

TRY SOMETHING NEW

Time to "recharge your batteries"? Consider taking up a new hobby, trying a new activity, or taking a class in a subject that excites you. You'll be more relaxed and you'll learn something new. The people you meet may be more willing to share contacts as well as hobby information. This also gives you new topics for "small talk". You may find it pays dividends in increased productivity and creativity on the job as well.

Steering A New Course

If you are trying to steer a new course, be sure your seasoned veterans and new recruits are on board!



It Takes Many Hands to Move a Ship - Maybe you have heard from, or commiserated with, other owners and managers who have been trying to "turn the ship" and feel that it is a solitary endeavor. Steering a new course is always challenging, but if you agree with the premise that it is easier to steer a ship when all hands set the rigging toward your intended heading, then it makes sense to bring your "crew" up to speed with your plans and not to consider them as adversaries. If you see yourself as solely responsible for bringing about change, your employees will probably wonder where, if at all, they fit into your plans. When they know "something" – but not "what" – is going on, they may fear that any action might hinder rather than assist your change, or they may take incorrect action. This can take the "wind out of their sails" and cause them to step back and avoid any actions that you may potentially welcome.

Keep an Open Mind - If you are coming into a new situation, keep an open mind about an individual employee's performance. Most people perform differently under various circumstances. Evaluate any information given to you by previous management in light of your own observations. Communicate and interact with employees to learn more about their strengths and weaknesses and how they interact and work with others. You may be able to inspire a disgruntled or underutilized employee to step up and meet new challenges. Going into a new endeavor with a "clean house" approach usually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and can cripple your business, leaving it short on valuable experience. Better to go with a "clean slate" approach.

Address Employee Fears - Employee resistance to change is largely based on fear of change. If your employees appear to be resisting change, ask questions to find out why. They may fear that the company will not survive a change, or that they will lose their job. Change may bring specific challenges to them that they feel ill equipped to meet. Communicate your reasons for bringing change to the company and the negative consequences of not taking action. Listen to and acknowledge your employees' thoughts. Try to minimize the hardships of change for employees. If job responsibilities are changed, offer an opportunity for training. If an employee wants to take this opportunity to try something different, see if this can fit with, or even facilitate, your plans. If you need to cut staff in some areas, retained staff will judge how you handle it. You might shuffle staff in different groups; give ample notice; or provide outplacement assistance, severance, or re-training.