

Build online network of contacts, referral sources and potential clients

BY EILEEN PARZEK
FOR THE BUSINESS REVIEW

The goals in business networking are to make contacts, build relationships, generate leads, meet prospects and spread the word about a business. With the widespread growth of e-mail and the Web, people are increasingly conducting their networking efforts online. With a keyboard and some commitment, anyone who can type can take advantage of this

opportunity to develop a global network of clients and contacts.



Parzek

TYPES OF BUSINESS NETWORKS

There are two common technologies used for online networking: mailing lists and Web discussion forums.

A mailing list is a group of e-mail addresses subscribed to a single list, where sending an e-mail to the list address distributes the e-mail to all of the subscribers. Business-networking mailing lists are discussion lists that are moderated by one or more individuals to keep the "noise" down.

Web discussion forums allow the user to register with a profile, and post messages under topics that remain accessible on the Web.

The discussions are usually searchable, and "threaded," which means that the original post and all the replies that follow are linked.

FINDING A PLACE TO NETWORK

Start the search for a good place to net-

work by asking net-savvy colleagues for recommendations. Do Web searches for keywords like "forum," "listserv," or "discussion board," and include the appropriate industry. For mailing lists, there are sites like Topica.com that categorize millions of mailing lists.

Look at the participation. How much traffic does the site seem to get? How many posts were there and how recently? Don't waste time subscribing if it doesn't seem like anyone ever comes there. Mailing lists are not as easy to gauge; so if it seems promising, subscribe and wait to see what comes through before making a determination.

GETTING STARTED

Join mailing lists either by filling out a form on a Web site, or sending an e-mail to a subscription address.

The service will probably send a confirmation for your reply, and then a welcome message explaining the basics of using that particular mailing list, followed by e-mails from the list.

Anyone who does any business online should have a "sig" file for their e-mail account.

This is simply business and contact information that is automatically appended to the end of every e-mail sent, and is set up in the options of the e-mail application.

For discussion forums, guest access is usually available, but to contribute, registration is required.

Registration involves filling out a form with contact information, as well as creating a user name and password. If there is a description or bio field, fill it out.

Very often, when someone wants to

know about a member of a forum, he or she would click on this profile to learn more.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

Before entering into a discussion, observe for a while. Get a feel for the types of people who are participating,

and what the communication style and personality of the group is.

Web discussion forums allow the user to register with a profile, and post messages under topics that remain accessible on the Web. The discussions are usually searchable, and "threaded," which means that the original post and all the replies that follow are linked.

If new members are introducing themselves, compose a brief introduction to post when you join.

One easy way to begin contributing is to scan for questions that other members ask, and reply.

Be helpful and share knowledge and information, as this is a way to establish expertise.

One of the most critical things to know about networking online is that blatant advertising and self-promotion is unwelcome.

Use indirect advertising, such as changing the information in the signature file occasionally or inviting people to read an article on the company Web site.

Networking online is a crucial time to brush up on the basic rules of "netiquette," such as:

- Typing in caps means the writer is shouting.

- When replying, trim the original message so it only contains essential aspects of the previous post.

- Do not post anything, without permission, that was sent to you privately.

MAKE IT EASIER

Networking online takes time and it is easy to become overwhelmed with e-mails, or have difficulty finding time to browse forums.

Here are some tips to make it simpler and easier to do:

- Scan the forum and identify which sub-topics to participate in and make it a habit to be a regular only where it is most relevant to your business.

- Set the option automatically signing into the forums if the computer is not shared with anyone else. There might also be an option for notification of any replies to what you have written.

- For mailing lists, set up filters in the e-mail application to store any incoming mail from a mailing list into a particular folder, for easy reading later.

With some effort and commitment, it is possible to develop an online network of contacts, referral sources and potential clients larger and broader than that which can be built face-to-face.

EILEEN PARZEK is a veteran Web designer and an online marketing and communications consultant who has been working from home and virtually since 1995. Her business, SOHO It Goes! specializes in providing technology-driven design, marketing and communication services to small businesses and organizations.