

Ask SCORE

I recently started a financial consulting business and will be attending a number of conferences where potential clients are likely to be. How can I best take advantage of these opportunities?

The most effective form of marketing is word-of-mouth. 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 a conference, 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 (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."

This column is brought to you by the Southern New Hampshire Chapter of SCORE, with more than 65 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business counseling and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit www.score-manchester.org for information on

counseling, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to info@score-manchester.org, with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.