

# Liens Carrières Right



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### Learning to Network By Trial and Error



by ROB LEVINSON

#### Introduction

Excellent article on the benefits of networking....

So my ducks are now in a row.

I have enthusiastically embraced my new identity as a consultant, articulated a new corporate story, launched a Web site that differentiates my offer and nurtured a robust network of marketing professionals. Now comes the hard part -- finding sustainable clients able to provide adequate income to support my family.

As I write this, I realize how fortunate I've been to have parents who always supported and believed in me and now, a patient wife who's willing to endure my career roller coaster a little longer. Furthermore, helping Kate, my daily partner-in-crime, to build her marketing business has been instrumental in getting me to think and act like a consultant. Her insights, encouragement and reality checks have motivated me to build my brand while concurrently growing her marketing consultancy, a major source of my income.

Thus armed with a support system and a history of work successes, I can walk into any gathering, confident that I can hold my own and have something to contribute.

OK -- so good for me. I have support and healthy self-esteem. Still won't pay the mortgage now, will it?

So how do I translate the momentum I have created thus far around my new business into cold, hard cash? How can I get in front of the right people, make my pitch and convince them that I'm worthy of being trusted with their assignments?

## **Bare Essentials**

While most of my income has come from teaming up on projects with Kate, I want and need to develop my own clients as well. I've calculated that for my family to remain comfortable under the RL Strategies umbrella, I need to sell two of my own branding workshops a month or the equivalent in consulting assignments. Each workshop requires about five days of my time, and my monthly quota of two, if I meet it, will bring in approximately what I earned annually as a corporate vice president of marketing. So far, I've had moderate success but, without sufficient funds to launch a formal marketing campaign, I have to be resourceful in finding new business.

At this stage, I promote my business exclusively through networking and word-of-mouth. Once revenues support it, I plan to begin a more formal outreach effort, which will include advertising, public relations and direct mail.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I admit I'm not a fan of staged networking events where people gather specifically to make connections -- they feel phony and forced and make me uncomfortable. Maybe that's because so many of the networking "events" I've attended have been just dreadful. With each passing gathering, I feel the joy being sucked out of me. Often I find myself in a roomful of other professionals -- each making their elevator speeches to any poor soul they can corner -- thinking, "I could be with my kids or reading a good book or folding laundry. Anything would be better than this." And just when I vow to never formally network again, a gem emerges. I'll meet that one person who is six degrees away from a paying client.

## **Being There**

As Woody Allen has noted, "80% of success is showing up." And after slogging through an untold number of these industry meetings, seminars, alumni get-togethers, pseudo-social meals and other networking gatherings, I have to admit he's right. Just showing up for these sorts of events can lead to discussions that result in business.

To improve my batting average, I've refined my business-development strategy somewhat. I make it a point to frequent networking events populated with professionals totally unlike myself (and as a right-brained marketer living in conservative Boston, where the leading industries are technology, financial services, law and biomedical research, this isn't too difficult).

I'll admit to having been initially uncertain whether I could translate my marketing efforts for De Beers LV, Timberland, Seagram's or a once-high-flying dot-com to a staid financial-services practice or medical-device company. But I soon discovered that, while my former and current clients may be worlds apart, the methodology of differentiating them in the marketplace isn't. Knowing this has made it relatively easy for me to convince even the

most left-brained chief executive officer that I can apply my experience to his business.

Furthermore, to borrow from off-price retailer Marshall's long standing positioning: I've learned that most clients really just want to get "brand names for less." So, for example, when I told the president of a financial-services company in suburban Boston about the "A" list of clients I've worked for, he commented, "If you were good enough for a global brand, you're good enough for me." And, gee, without agency overhead, he reasoned, I'm a whole lot more affordable. I now have a strong relationship with his company, which includes him offering my marketing services to his clients as an added benefit to his core business.

### **Changes in Attitude, Changes in Latitude**

Despite how I feel about networking, the fact is that if I don't make the effort, I preclude myself from generating exposure and business opportunities. Once I acknowledged this to myself, I bit the bullet and started attending local and industry networking events at least twice a week-- sometimes more. A marketing seminar here and venture forum there. And then an open house at a national business publication, a local professionals group and a gathering for entrepreneurs at a well-known university and so on. I even met with a friend of a friend who knows someone who makes marketing decisions at an early-stage company. While many of these encounters have been painful, often requiring a post-event "deep cleansing breath," each eventually resulted in at least a lead to a potential new-business prospect.

If convincing myself to go to the event is step one, step two is marching into the room with something interesting to say. Through trial and error, I've found that, in order to become more appealing to others, I had to stop selling myself...and start buying them.

### **Good Listening, Adroit Insights**

To get a prospect to share his story, I first identify his pain-point. What in his business is giving him heartburn? Why is he pacing the floor at 2 a.m.? What solution can I offer to his biggest problem? I'm fortunate in this regard because my business is in telling stories. I help companies get to the essence of their brands and then come up with the "words and pictures" required to artfully communicate their key messages -- eventually driving exposure that generates sales.

Yet half the time I have no idea what a prospect is talking about, making it tough to get to the root of the problem.

Not one to assume airs or stand on ceremony, I often ask an entrepreneur or business executive to explain his

business to me "as if I were 9 years old." People often find this charming, and they assume I am being disingenuous. The fact is, I really mean it. It's much harder to tell a short story than a long story. In asking people to address me "as a child," I'm really requesting they condense their story to just the facts minus the industry jargon, techno-babble and superfluous M.B.A.-speak.

Once I understand their business concept, my marketing juices start flowing. This newfound insight breeds creativity, which translates into enthusiasm, which results in rapid-fire idea generation ...which is what every prospective client craves in a new audience. At this point I have them. Then I strike -- while the iron is hot -- and request a subsequent meeting on the spot.

### **So What'll It Be?**

Whether it's a formal meeting at company headquarters or a more casual Starbucks break, in advance of a prospect meeting I always conduct research (starting with the requisite Google search, of course). I seek to develop a working understanding of the business in question, identify key competitors and consider a menu of ways in which my services can enhance, explain or refine the offer. The trick is to be prepared, passionate and 100% confident that I can offer a solution to a problem. Naturally, a proposal of services will accompany my thank-you e-mail.

So far, my track record has been pretty good. In fact, only one piece of business has been lost to a competitor; the other projects fell by the wayside due to budget cuts, bad timing or other internal conflicts. But in my experience, the best way to get new business at this stage of the game is simply by being there, being smart and persevering.

-- *[Mr. Levinson](#) is an independent marketing consultant in Boston.*

*Talk to Rob about marketing for start-ups. [Join him and other readers](#) on StartupJournal's discussion board.*

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