

# MAKING Connections

How can small business owners become networking rock stars? **We've got some ideas**

By Darren Campbell

When you own a small business, you have to do it all. With a limited number of staff on hand, proprietors rarely have anyone to pass the buck to. They have to hire. They have to fire. They have to oversee advertising and deal with payroll issues. The list goes on and on. With so much on their plate, owners may find it difficult to unchain themselves from their desks and do something essential for the health of their businesses—network.

Hannah Bell, executive director of the PEI Business Women's Association, thinks small business owners must make time to network. They need to get out of the office and into their communities, taking on leadership roles and getting to know people if they want their businesses to prosper. "It's so easy to be behind the computer screen that we don't think we have to do this stuff anymore," Bell says. "But relationships are critical to business success and the best way to build them is through one-on-one interactions."

But what are some options that allow time-strapped small business owners to put their best foot forward when networking? Here are nine ways to make connections to build your business.

#### FEEDBACK

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**Stapleton**



**Fraser**



**Ross**



**Bell**

**Take up a new activity or hobby**

Trying something new isn't a traditional way to network, but it can be very effective, allowing you to meet new people outside your normal business circle. "If your networking and business is drawn from the same people, you max out your opportunities," says Erin Stapleton, who runs Stapleton Environmental Consulting in St. John's. "You have to go out and find new contacts."

**Use social media —a lot**

Whatever social media you use, be sure to do it well. "Make your LinkedIn presence or whatever you use compelling," says Mark Fraser, chair of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce and vice-president of T4G's Halifax office. "Include your interests, speak about yourself, and share contacts on a regular basis. You need to take care of it and maintain it."

**Join an industry association**

Industry associations often have online directories or membership lists that expose your business to new clients and they organize events where you can meet people in your line of business and talk shop. "It can also connect you with experts in your area of work. They can help with questions you might have or other business issues," says Krista Ross, CEO of the Fredericton Chamber of Commerce.

**Meet and mingle**

Find the bars, restaurants and coffee shops that have people you'd like to connect with and then go to them. People are much more relaxed in social settings, so these venues can be ideal places to build relationships. "You build effective networking and marketing through relationships, and that's done by meeting people and through one-on-one interactions," Bell says.



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## Volunteer in your community

Volunteering is an excellent way to see and be seen in the community you live and do business in. Not only are you helping your community, you're generating goodwill for your business and connecting with people. "I want people to know me and like me because if they know me and like me, they might do business with me," Stapleton says. "Volunteering introduces you to people you may not have met and there's a whole pool of potential networking contacts there."

## Join a non-related industry association

How can joining an industry association that has nothing to do with your business be a great networking opportunity? Fraser says it can cast a wider networking net without running into all the usual suspects. "Say you are in the talent attraction business, you could join something unrelated, like Digital Nova Scotia," Fraser says. "That way you're meeting potential customers, not potential colleagues or competitors."

## Be a mentor

A willingness to advise and help others can be a powerful networking tool. Mentors can develop strong personal relationships with the people they help, and that's inevitably good for their business. "These people get to meet you, know you and they get comfortable with you, comfortable enough to refer you to their networks," Ross says. "But this is not just about cultivating clients. You can be a good resource for them and build trust that way."

## Be a guest speaker

Actively seek out opportunities to speak publicly about topics you know a lot about—especially if it has to do with your sector. This positions you as an expert and thought leader in your field, giving you exposure money can't buy. "This is one of the best things you can do," Fraser says. "Getting a speaking role at an event significantly improves your chances of meeting people, especially if you mention in your talk, 'I want to meet some of you.'"

## Attend conferences, but do so with purpose

Industry-specific conferences are a networking mainstay for businesses but they can be expensive. Do your homework on the conferences you want to attend and have a plan in place so your networking consists of more than handing out hundreds of business cards. "This isn't about meeting as many people as you can but the highest quality people you can. Have an idea of the type of people you expect will be at the conference. Then you need to look for them and know what you want to say to them," Fraser says.

