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# Strategic Networking Guide

## Generating referrals with the power of relationships

Typically, small service businesses begin growing through referrals. Happy clients speak about your work to people they know and suddenly you have new leads. It can feel magical... and as referrals happen organically, you passively wait for them to come in and generate new business. You don't have to do much to make this happen, except keep doing your best work.

This guide is about taking control of this organic base of referrals and implementing a system to generate leads like these strategically and intentionally - moving beyond passive mode to become a catalyst for lead generation.

Referral-based marketing (which is what this is) begins with strategy. You need a clear definition of your ideal client or niche and a targeted list of the types of relationships you can cultivate in order to get an increased volume of referrals. *Think of this strategy as a polite form of stalking... you need to figure out who works with your ideal client in a different capacity and build relationships that can lead to referrals.*

Referral-based marketing also means creating an aura of expertise around yourself and your work, as well as providing collaborative value to your referral partners. Ideally, you become known for your skills and expertise in a particular area... making it easy for others to explain what you do and how you work.

This marketing channel is built on a platform of personal relationships you cultivate through direct contact, direct engagement via social media groups and masterminds, and speaking either in person or as a part of virtual events.

NOTE - - > It is essential that your referral partners come to view you as a trusted colleague, expert, and someone with value to offer in the marketplace. They should be eager to work with you, or refer their clients and friends to you, because they believe in the value of your work.



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## Implementation Plan for Strategic Networking

Review your core message. Refine it into a memorable statement you can quickly share with potential referral partners. Give them a clear idea of who you are, what you do, and who you work with so they can refer clients to your business with ease.

Practice delivering this core message in a conversational way. If the words feel a bit formal and different than your normal voice, adapt them. Be sure you have a ready response to the question, “What do you do?”

### Create a clear definition of your ideal client and/or niche.

Who are you most interested in working with or serving? This is the starting point of your strategy. You’ll want to identify descriptors such as industry, personality, and point of need if you can.

Examples of my ideal client definitions:

- Creative entrepreneurs who offer custom services such as interior design, photography, web design, custom artwork, custom jewelry, etc.
- Professionals (attorneys, doctors, accountants) looking to expand their audience.
- Manufacturing / industrial / corporate clients who want to implement digital strategy.

Your definitions will likely be different than mine, but the format and specificity should be similar. If your definitions are more general, spend some time narrowing your scope.

### Identify referral sources.

This step requires a bit of observation and investigation. Simply put, you need to identify other businesses that engage with or serve your ideal clients. These businesses do not need to be in your industry or related to your industry. They just need to be in a position to have a trusted relationship with your ideal client. Unsure of how to do this? I recommend reading *The Pumpkin Plan* by Mike Michalowicz for a great description of this tactic.

Another potential referral source comes from connecting with people in an online group or on a social platform such as LinkedIn. You can also connect inside an online course or



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mastermind group. Look for groups that include either your ideal clients OR people who work with your ideal clients.

Your focus here is ultimately developing a handful of referral relationships - people who understand your work, see value in it, and have relationships of their own with your ideal clients.

So, for example - my work provides marketing expertise and insight to business owners who are trying to build growth and momentum. My referral relationships include business coaches, professional service people (such as accountants or financial advisers), and other creative professionals such as web designers or IT professionals. We share the same ideal clients - making referrals easy and natural.

When a client expresses a need for marketing support, my accountant referral partner can point that person to my business with confidence because he sees the value in my work and trusts me to give his client a positive experience.

You're looking for people you can get to know on this level. You only need a handful of referral relationships to transform your business.

### **Create a strategic relationship “target list”.**

Once you've identified potential referral partners, create a list of 3-5 as a beginning point for relationship building. If possible, select targets who are already familiar with you in some way (so you can get started easily). You might select a target who worked with you the past in some capacity - either as a client or as a colleague. You might also select a target who is a friend of someone who knows your work well. Look for connections you can leverage to start the conversation - introductions, mutual friends, etc.

### **Reach out to the people on your target list to begin a dialogue.**

Let's be honest - this is the scary step. But, it can also be the most natural, especially if you embrace a mindset of positive mutual benefit. Reach out and suggest an exploratory conversation... maybe a virtual coffee or a chat about supporting one another.

Be honest about your goal... of course you are hoping to get referrals from this person. That's your side of the equation. However, mastering this marketing strategy means finding ways to benefit each individual referral partner. You'll feel much more comfortable when you



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consider their side of the equation (what's in it for them) and identify ways you can add real value to their life or business. Be sure to engage honestly and with a willing and generous spirit. Listen to their needs and concerns, and be open to whatever develops as you chat together.

## **Prepare several ways you feel comfortable adding value.**

As I mentioned in the last point, mastering this strategy means offering real value to your referral partners. You don't want to be that person who takes and takes without providing anything in return - *it just feels sleazy and it's not good for business.*

Ideally, collaborating with you will fill a real need for your strategic referral partners. Some options to consider are...

- *Offering Services* - share your expertise with your referral partners at no charge.
- *Assisting with Marketing* - support your referral partners by promoting their offers, engaging with them on social platforms, or introducing them to people you know.
- *Providing Referrals* - get to know their business so you can refer your clients to them.

## **Create a system for managing your referral relationships.**

In a perfect world, we would keep all the important information we need to maintain relationships in our heads. We would remember everyone's birthday, know their address, and recall important details of their lives. But, this isn't a perfect world.

Strategic referral relationships are actually mutually beneficial friendships. They must be maintained intentionally through regular, thoughtful contact - just like other friendships.

You need a system for managing your strategic relationships. You can select and use a CRM if you like, or just simply keep an analog system like an old-school tickler file or notebook. The system is up to you - but it's crucial that you pay attention to the little details that build warmth into your strategic relationships. Don't skip this step.

A thoughtful note, small gift, or friendly chat goes a long way to keeping your relationships strong (and beneficial).



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## **Bonus Tactic :: Use speaking as a source of strategic networking.**

Not everyone is cut out for speaking - either live or via an interview like a podcast. Not everyone is ready to lead a workshop or participate in a webinar. I totally understand, and that's why this is a bonus tactic. It's not essential for success in strategic networking... but it is super helpful.

Before you discount this as something you would "never do," think about this...

Something happens when we engage live with an expert. We hear the expert's voice. We experience the expert's energy and enthusiasm. We are immediately impacted by the message shared by the expert and drawn closer emotionally. Have you ever felt you "know" an expert you've followed but never actually met?

This is the power of speaking. Leveraging it will supercharge your success with this marketing channel. I encourage you to really consider speaking as an option and to build your skills in this area if possible. You'll be glad you did!

*Strategic networking is an effective way to generate a steady stream of client referrals. Mastering this marketing channel has a sustainable impact on overall business growth. Is this the right path for you? Let's talk.*

*Visit [michellehuntercreative.com](http://michellehuntercreative.com) to schedule a chat.*