

# HOW SMALL-TOWN VALUES CAN TRANSFORM YOUR NETWORKING SKILLS



## INTRODUCTION

Is your small business growing more slowly than you'd like? It may be time to close your internet browser, hit the power button on your computer and head out into the real world for a little old-fashioned, small-town social networking.

In the age of social media, advertising campaigns, online profiles and relentless notifications, it's easy for small-business owners to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the digital landscape. This causes them to overlook the real-world connections that can play a vital role in the long-term success of any commercial enterprise.

**Public appearances, participation in community events and the cultivation of personal relationships can give your company a competitive advantage.**

This idea is well supported by research and reinforced at the highest levels of the business world.

85% of business executives believe face-to-face meetings build stronger, more meaningful relationships compared with online communications, according to [one survey of 750 business executives by Forbes Insights](#). Still, many small businesses struggle to allocate enough time and energy to real-world relationship building, and instead rely too heavily on digital connections.

"I think many people, especially younger people, have a real issue with making that personal connection because everything is so digital," says Terry Dugas, marketing and public relations manager for the [Greater Iberia Chamber of Commerce](#).



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Whether your business is operating in a rural hideaway or a bustling metropolis, there are plenty of opportunities to both increase your company's connections in the community and develop long-lasting and productive relationships.



Even a small dose of tried-and-true small-town networking can help your business stand out and reach its full potential.

That personal approach is a philosophy at the heart of Cane River Pecan Company's mission. We understand and appreciate our role in helping companies create and maintain meaningful business relationships that lead to exceptional business opportunities.

"We know, first hand, what it is like to create and maintain successful and meaningful corporate relationships, ones that lead to perpetual business opportunities," says Jady Regard, Chief Nut Officer at Cane River Pecan Company.

**The following are a few ways to engage people in your community and build meaningful, long-lasting relationships.**

## FIND YOUR TRIBE

Years ago when Tom Egelhoff first moved to Bozeman, Montana, to start a new job, the only person he knew was the man who had hired him. Egelhoff, who is now an independent business consultant and the author of “How To Market, Advertise & Promote Your Business Or Service In A Small Town,” immediately joined several civic clubs in town to widen his social circle. It’s a strategy he recommends for any small-business owner.

Civic organizations like Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions Club offer the opportunity to have a positive effect in your community while expanding your personal and professional network. Egelhoff recommends checking out the various groups to see which ones match up best with the target market for your business.

“Once you get to know people, you can ask them for referrals because they know you in a non-business setting,” he says.

“Once they know you and the kind of person you are they are a lot more receptive to recommending you to their friends and colleagues.”

Another effective way to develop more meaningful community connections is to join your local chamber of commerce. In addition to lobbying for business-friendly public policies, these organizations hold regular events that facilitate connections between companies — and can help you develop powerful relationships that could be difficult to cultivate on your own.

When considering membership, Dugas suggests visiting your local chamber office to discuss the benefits and resources available with the staff. He says chamber membership can be a key component in an overall strategy to build stronger ties with the community, especially if it’s combined with a wider plan to connect with businesses and residents.



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The main thing is making yourself accessible to the people you want to patronize your business. That means getting involved in your community — not only when it benefits you financially — as a way to get your face out there. It always benefits you to just get out there and start shaking hands.

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- Terry Dugas,  
Greater Iberia Chamber of Commerce

## CREATE A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

If your business is operating in a densely populated area, you may have to make a concerted effort to connect. “I think the connections are lost in bigger cities,” Egelhoff says. “I think in small towns people still have that feeling where they want to see you up close and personal.”

That doesn’t mean it’s impossible. There are plenty of ways, many of them low cost, to increase your company’s community outreach and visibility. For example, consider sponsoring or coaching a children’s sports team, teaming up with a nonprofit organization for a fundraiser or renting a popular venue for an

evening and inviting all of your clients or neighbors to a private party.

Jacqueline Whitmore, founder of The Protocol School of Palm Beach, which provides executive leadership and business etiquette training, suggests hosting quarterly dinners with six to 12 clients or other business owners, where conversations don’t necessarily have to focus on business. Those connections can pay off down the road in unexpected ways.

“Entrepreneurs and business owners are eager to meet and mastermind with smart, like-minded people who are also in search of reciprocal, long-

lasting relationships,” she says.

Michelle Christie, an online visibility coach and social media expert who helps clients position their businesses to generate visibility, says volunteering is one of the easiest and most cost-effective community outreach techniques.

“Getting all employees together once a month to do some Saturday morning cleaning in a community park will improve a company’s reputation and the look of the local greenery,” Christie says. “Make some company T-shirts for your employees to wear and you’re all set.”

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## **REMEMBER THE PERSONAL TOUCH**

For a business owner trying to build long-lasting client relationships, digital communications only hold so much power. Online connections can indeed provide some real-world value, but they are no substitute for human-to-human connections or tangible gestures of friendship. For example, a thoughtful gift can go a long way in demonstrating to a client that your relationship is important, while also cultivating a sense of community for your customers.

EdR, a Memphis, Tennessee-based leader in the collegiate housing industry, sends clients a customized tin of pecans from Cane River Pecan Company each year around the holiday season. EdR’s Katelyn Schmidt says the gifts, which the company customizes with its own branding, help remind their partners that they value their relationship. “It’s a really nice gift,” she says.

Adding your personal touch and taking the time to make a genuine connection is vital to cultivating

lasting business relationships. It’s a philosophy that will serve you well in face-to-face meetings as you spend more time in your community making connections. When you encounter a potential client, be patient and avoid leading with a hard sell, particularly when meeting someone for the first time.

Missy Bienvenu Andrade, vice president of investor relations and development at [One Acadiana](#), says to take a moment to adequately introduce yourself and avoid leading an interaction with your business card. Instead, take some time to learn about the other person and what makes them special.

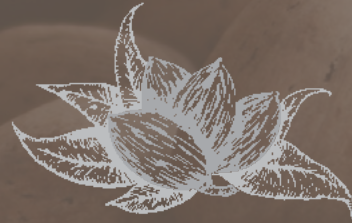
“Listen, recognize your similarities and go the extra mile to connect the dots for your new contact, either to people they should know or resources they should know about,” she says. “The most successful networkers know how to remain grounded and friendly. People want to do business with people [who] are likeable.”

## CONCLUSION

To set your company up for sustained success, make sure you are dedicating the appropriate amount of time and resources to connecting with your community and establishing worthwhile relationships that go beyond the computer screen.

It may not offer the instant gratification of a Facebook “Like,” but a patient, small-town networking approach is a strategy that will certainly pay off for your business in the long run. ■





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