

# **BUSINESS COMMUNITY RELATIONS 101**

## **Getting the Most Out of Your Chamber Membership**

Since the major part of a small business typically comes from business to business services, it is essential to maintain a positive standing with the local business community. It is of value to you to join as many business type organizations as possible in your town. You should attend meetings when possible and introduce your clients to each other.

Most towns and all cities have chambers of commerce. The chamber offers many things to small businesses especially new ones and start-ups. Chambers provide a voice for the business community, a bridge between government - small business – corporations – volunteers - religious organizations – schools – clubs - homeowners associations – corporations – general public – etc. It's a monumental job, always changing. It takes money, lots of it. It takes coordination and a knack for small town politics. It takes members who will volunteer, who care and are dedicated. Of course that's where you come in. Chambers of Commerce hold various events such as:

- Mixers
- Table Top Exhibits/Expos
- Seminars
- Luncheons
- Committee Meetings
- Installation Dinners
- Benefits
- Educational Exchanges
- Home Based Business Groups
- Networking Breakfast Meetings
- Membership Drives

If you attend some of these events, you will make new friends, contacts and customers. Anyone can join the chamber. It usual costs \$100-450. But you only get out what you put in. Many small business owners may see it as a waste of money. In actuality it is relatively inexpensive depending how you chose to use your membership. It can be long lasting advertising in the form of:

- Promotion

- P.R.
- Networking
- Free Media Coverage
- And Fun

- **Joining Committees**

If you truly want to become involved, we suggest you join various Chamber of Commerce committees. Committees need your input. You probably talk to one hundred business owners and residential customers per week. Five hundred per month. They know you, they trust you and they generally speak their mind to you. When these associates, business customers and business people talk to politicians, it's a more tactful type conversation. When they talk to Chamber of Commerce staff, they tend to also choose their words more carefully. When they talk to you, it's more point blank, to the point, blunt and the reality of the way they really feel. You'll never get a sugar coated answer to a small business dilemma from an actual owner. They'll tell you how they feel. Whether they are happy or mad as hell about an issue. You also are the eyes and ears of the community with it's residences.

When you come to these committees you bring knowledge. You will soon find your ideas, observations and personal opinion are paramount. You are the most valuable tool a chamber committee could ever hope to have. You need to ask yourself "Do you have the extra time?" If you don't, don't volunteer. There is nothing worse than a committee member who volunteers and then doesn't pull through when he or she is needed. If you have the time you be repaid in new business contacts and customers and the feeling of knowing you made the difference.

How do you join a committee? Talk to the president of the chamber. Tell them you want to volunteer. Find out which chamber committees have openings. Many times there is no limit to the number of people, so try to pick one with a large group of members. You will be able to do more networking and big groups tend to divide sub-committee work loads more evenly. Join a committee that interests you. Don't join one you don't care about. Just like in college, you always got better grades in the classes you enjoyed, didn't you? Make sure the people in the group really want to get something done and it's not just a who's who social gathering. That kind of group eventually fails to accomplish even the most basic of mission statements. You are a winner, so you should be in a winning group.

Make sure once you have gone to a couple of meetings, the turnover is low and that no one person's ego stands out in the group, especially if it's the chairman. If this happens, go to one more meeting and dismiss yourself. "Business is so good, I don't have any time left." Then volunteer to with flyer distribution by leaving information on your counter or delivering this vital information to your customers and business clients. Tell everyone you are more than happy to be of assistance. Then give everyone in the group your card. You

can still help without battling personalities. Remember everyone there is volunteering and it is better to be a friend than an enemy.

- **Board Of Directors**

Being on the board of directors of a Chamber of Commerce is extremely important. It's an easy job and very prestigious. It's also great for business. You will receive notice when board seats come up for election. Usually chambers ask their members through direct mail if anyone would like to run for a board seat. Fill out the form with a brief resume. Make sure not to go over the maximum word count. Try to shave off ten percent if possible because people tend to read the short ones more. Don't exaggerate your accomplishments. If you need help with this, call one of the current board members you know who is not re-running for the same position. Find out from the chamber what day they will be mailing the ballots and call everyone in the chamber two days before. It's important not only to win, but to win by a margin. It gives you clout with the chamber members and staff. When you win, make sure to attend as many meetings as possible. Usually meetings are only one time per month.

- **Grand Openings**

When you are privy to information about a new business opening or a grand opening ribbon cutting event, you should visit the business:

- To sign them up as new customers
- To offer to give free products or service coupons for grand opening goers
- To help them meet potential buyers, namely all your customers
- To say hi and let them know you are all in the same boat and wish them many years of success

- **Internet Programs**

Always try to get your company listed in the Chambers on-line directory. There may be an additional charges for this, but it is worth it.

- **Distribution Of Monthly Newsletters**

Most Chamber of Commerce publish a monthly newsletter of what's going on around town and with various business members. The more hot little hands these newsletters get into, the better it is for the advertisers and the better for you as a member. It's also great for chamber membership, the more people who join the Chamber the more people in the club to buy from you and help all the businesses in the community. If you have a mobile type business and volunteer to deliver a chamber newsletter to every business in your area, you will surely be a chamber favorite. If you are a retail or location based business, have them on

your counter for customers and associates. Your customers will also be glad to receive a copy and your business customers will eventually join the chamber if they haven't already. You will be helping businesses everywhere in town by doing this. This will be recognized. It will also help you when the chamber does a story on you to put in the newsletter. Of course, that month we will print extra copies and direct mail them to every licensed business in your town and all of our franchisees. Try to refer fellow businesses to the chamber each month.

- **Membership Drives**

Whenever the chamber has a membership drive, you should volunteer to help. You have fax data bases and distribution power "plus" you know personally many business owners in town. Chamber membership is the life line of their existence. The more you, we help them, the more they help you. It is okay to join many chambers or at least all the ones where you want customers.

- **Logo On Vehicle**

Offer to put a magnetic sign on your work vehicles with the local Chamber of Commerce logo. This helps the chamber and legitimizes your business. If this is not possible, put your Chamber of Commerce member plaque on your dash board. If you have a location business, be sure to display your plaque where it can be seen by all visitors

- **Meeting With Chamber**

You should be on a first name basis with the Chamber of Commerce president. You probably already are. He or she needs your feedback. They need to know what's going on at the street level and no one knows better than you. You will be the eyes and ears for the chamber. You should set aside one hour per month to discuss concerns you've heard on the street and possible solutions you've worked out. Try to make it a regular meeting such as the first Tuesday of the month at 8:00 am. This meeting can be with the Chamber manager or even a Board Member you can relate with. If you belong to a committee bring your information and observations there.

- **Network With Other Groups**

You should network with your service club whether it be Elks, Lions, Optimists, Kiwanis, Rotary, Soroptimists, whatever. Bring those concerns with you. Help the chamber co-sponsor events with your club and other clubs, making one big happy united family town thanks to you. You can also volunteer to help on the Boys and Girls Club, United Way or other associated non-profit, which helps people. By adding your Chamber Membership to a non-profit commitment, you will make a difference and super-charge your business.

- **Attending Meetings**

You should attend meetings sponsored by your Chamber of Commerce. As many as you can. Enough that you don't need to wear a name tag because everyone already knows you. You still should wear a name tag. However write on it:

- A New Friend
- Customer Service
- Me
- Label
- Name Tag
- Just Me
- I love meeting new people
- Put name on upside down

Sounds funny but it's a great ice breaker. It works every time. After all, there is bound to be a new face popping up every once in a while. Many of these new members may feel intimidated and you can help them and really make a new friend and business associate creating team work, co-marketing efforts and sharing of customer lists with non-competing businesses.

- **Trade Shows**

Table top mixers and trade shows are very important. Smaller shows – such as city fair, county fair, Chamber of Commerce Business Fair, etc. – you can do for relatively low cost.

Pretty good statistics. Trade fairs and shows are good.

One of the major advantages of exhibiting in a show is the tremendous impact that you can deliver and direct to a preconditioned group of prospects. Through your exhibit, these prospects can see how they can benefit from your services and/or products. Exhibiting in various types of shows offers you both short and long range benefits.

As with any of your sales promotion programs, the success of your show participation depends largely on proper planning. Before you enter a show, analyze all the factors involved and determine if the show will attract prospects who will require your services. Your final decision should be based upon the estimate of value you will receive for the money, time and effort put forth.

To get information on the shows scheduled for your area, contact your local Chamber of Commerce. If you are considering entering an annual show, ask for a list of regular exhibitors from past years. Then check with these exhibitors for their opinions as to the value of the show.

- **Referrals – Word Of Mouth**

No matter what you do at a Chamber of Commerce meeting, remember to bring cards. Chamber mixers draw about fifty people or more, grand openings twenty, committee meetings ten. Always say when handing out cards, "If you do not need our service/products please take this card and give it to someone who might be interested. Thanks." This will make the person happy that you are not pressuring them and they will be glad to pass it on.

- **Letters To The Editor**

You should rifle off at least one letter a month to the local paper praising a small business, the Chamber of Commerce or how happy you are to have a business here. If you have a reason to praise more than one person, type the letter and have a co-worker sign it.

**Conclusion:**

Your success in your business is up to you, we live in the greatest country in the world. You are allowed to unlimited success, but with that incredible gift you are also allowed to fail. The ball is in your court, your chamber membership can be one of your greatest assets, but you only get out what you put in. Stay involved, do not ever give up and use your chamber to help you win.