

Transitioning Personal Networks and Conversations Into Business

By Greg Kanz, APR, CPSM



The next generation of A/E/C professionals is an impressive wave of talent. They're diverse, well-educated, and altruistic, with a personal network seamlessly connected with technology. They're eager to advance their careers and change the world for the better. They can often see the potential of working with personal connections, but lack the skills to transition those connections into a business relationship.

The challenge for A/E/C leadership is to teach them business skills, like networking and taking a consultative approach to conversations. New graduates and professionals need to fill in the knowledge gaps related to business acumen and marketing skills. How can we as marketers and business developers help them during this time when personal and business worlds are colliding due to the pandemic?

Realize the Value of Personal Networks

The first step is to help young professionals gain an appreciation of people they already know. They may assume their connections are limited. But, as they sketch their personal network on a whiteboard, it's always a joyful discovery. They soon realize they have a solid foundation to build a business network. Clusters of potential future business relationships include the following:

Current and future clients. Have them list past clients and colleagues either at their firm or nonprofits where they volunteer, in addition to friends and family members. These are people who

value and have a stake in advancing their professional skills. Add to the list those whom they aspire to work with in the future. Up to three names of potential clients of interest should go in this bubble on the white board.

Current and future partners. These may be coworkers, colleagues in other firms, or product vendors. They should write down three to five names of people they're familiar with who would be willing to have open dialogues about business trends and opportunities.

Connectors. These people seem to know everyone. They can often make a direct connection or use their network to facilitate an introduction. Connectors are like Miracle-Gro® for establishing new relationships. Identify the connectors in the network and add them to the mix.

Mentors. These are the final keys in possible connections. It's important for the young professional to name at least one person they consider a mentor for professional advice and counsel. Consider mentors for different areas of expertise. These coaches are essential for learning but often help grow the network, too.

Make the Business Transition

Once the list is complete, how should young professionals go about initiating conversations? Glenda Kohout, business developer for Shive-Hattery in West Des Moines, IA, says younger staff don't have to close a deal; they just need to open a door. She explains, "When they realize their mission is to be a resource and learn more about them, it takes all the pressure off."

Kohout is often asked how to transition a casual conversation to open the door for a business opportunity. Here are her top tips for creating organic conversations.

Engage in active listening. An active listener is present in the moment and genuinely interested in what the other person has to say. They should let go of the urge to rehearse how they want to respond and ask questions instead. This relentless focus on others will spark ideas and provide opportunities to help and share insights.

Be informal. While in a personal conversation with someone new, young professionals should informally share what they do and who they work for. They should weave this into the conversation versus reciting an elevator speech. It's more comfortable for them if they describe what they love about their career and tell stories about the people they work with. Authenticity wins.



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Connect with stories. Young professionals might not have worked directly on enough projects yet to tell their own stories. Help them understand that firm stories are equally theirs. They can learn a lot by asking peers about projects, and they should take good notes. There's an art and a process to telling a good, concise story. Help them frame it in an outline:

- Challenge (What business problem did the project solve?)
- Solution (How did we solve the challenge?)
- Impact (What did our solution do for them?)

Then instruct them to put that into three to four sentences—keep it short and connect it to what's important to the person they're talking with. They should know what's important to them because they've been actively listening.

Be a resource. Young professionals need to realize that while they may not be able to help directly, they likely know someone in their network who can. They can begin building trust by being a resource for a variety of things. When discussing a challenge, they shouldn't expect to have all the answers or an instant solution. They may simply be able to connect the other person to a

Social Media Dos and Don'ts

Personal spaces (ultimately in the public sight) like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and other social media platforms create a digital contrail. Here are a few dos and don'ts young professionals should keep in mind to protect their reputations, and those of their firms:

Do:	Don't:
Know the personal brand you want to convey. Filter every social media activity through your values—does it fit who you are and what you believe in and care about?	Express every thought and feeling or post in the heat of the moment when emotions are high. Some things cannot be unsaid or undone.
Set up two-step authentication to ensure your account is secure and as hack-free as possible.	Accept a Facebook friend request from someone you don't know.
Double-check hashtags to ensure you're associating your post with correct and appropriate content.	Assume social media posts disappear. Screenshots and video can be taken by others who aren't connected to you but may know you through mutual friends.
Assume what you put out on social media can be seen/heard by anyone, including your professional network.	Engage in online arguments or disagreements, or assume others will understand the context of a joke or sarcastic comment.
Implement "tag review" on Facebook's "Timeline and Tagging" setting to control posts/images associated with you.	Express opinions too early before you have all the facts and context.
Review your public profile to make sure it conveys your authentic image.	Check in everywhere you go—some things are best left private (bars, clubs, etc.).
Google yourself to see what content appears in the first few search pages.	Post political commentary unless it's done with civility—get out and vote instead.

resource who can help. They should position themselves as a go-to person for ideas and connections.

Don't expect perfection. Perhaps most important, professionals just starting out should give themselves permission to fail. "Focus on becoming better, rather than being perfect," Kohout advises. "This approach breaks through the paralysis of getting started."

Whether you're new to the profession or an experienced marketer or business developer, these steps can help transition personal networks to business colleagues. With the blurred lines already created during these times, it makes more sense than ever to look toward expanding our business networks. ■



GREG KANZ is marketing director for Shive-Hattery's eleven offices across Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. He helps cross-office market-sector teams evolve strategies and tactics to move forward as one firm. Contact him at 319.560.0250 or gregkanz@shive-hattery.com.