

THE PLACE TO NETWORK

As a Marketing Tool 'Membership Has Its Advantages'

By Olivia Fox Cabane

DECIDE

How many memberships do you have? If it takes you more than a few seconds to remember, you're in good company. Many people are surprised when they realize the extent of their affiliations — industry organizations, charity boards, golf clubs, groups they don't even remember joining. Needless to say, they aren't very involved in most of these groups, and unfortunately, a passive membership won't do you much good. Sure, there's always the chance that something will fall into your lap without your lifting a finger. But let's face it, the odds of a target requesting the organizations' member registry, combing through the pages, and exclaiming "Eureka!" when they see your name, are somewhat slim.

The fact is, like most other things in life, you'll get out of a membership only as much as you put into it. So if you want to make the most of your affiliations, you're going to have to put in some effort.

STREAMLINE

That's why it might be a good idea to actually *reduce* the number of groups you belong to — I advocate two or three at most. If you have too many, you'll either end up running around like a wound-up toy trying to be as active as you should be in all of them, and your other activities will suffer. Or you'll end up not really participating in any of your groups; thereby not getting much out of any of them.

Instead, narrow your memberships down to one or two organizations

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where you'll really have an impact. Which organizations should you pick? That depends on what your goals are. Ask yourself which organization has the kind of people who can help you reach your objectives. Do you want to increase business development? In that case, you would be wise to select the organization your targets are in, rather than that of your peers. You will be far more effective than by staying within your own professional circles.

For instance, if you're a tax attorney specializing in real estate, the ABA might not be the best forum to grow your book of business. Sure, you might get a few referrals, but overall, many of the other members are competition. On the other hand, if you join the National Real Estate Association, you could be swimming in a pool of potential clients. You could also join the American Association of CPAs and be deluged with referral partnerships. "But I'm not a CPA," you say. Not to worry. Often, associate memberships are available in organizations where full membership requires professional certification such as an accounting or medical degree.

Once you've streamlined your memberships, you're ready for Phase Two — get active. The most efficient way to do so is usually to join a committee. Sometimes it's as easy as expressing an interest; sometimes it takes a while for a spot to open; sometimes you'll have to go through an approval process.

SELECT

Naturally, you'll want to select the committee just as carefully as you selected the organizations. So what's the right committee for you? You may think it's the one whose function is as close as possible to your job function: lawyers go to legal, marketers to marketing, techies to technology. Although this may seem like the logical choice, it's not the most effective one.

Instead, go back to your goals. Do you want to learn as much about the field as possible? Then Research, Education or Publishing might be the best fit for you.

Do you want to find a new position? Then find a committee that reaches out to the kind of companies and departments where you'd like to work. How about Sponsor Relations, or perhaps Marketing & PR? If you're in legal marketing, and you want to move into healthcare marketing, you could reach out through the Marketing & PR committee to a marketing firm with many healthcare clients. Or say you're a lawyer striving to move in-house. Through the Sponsor Relations committee, you become well acquainted with people in your target companies.

Do you want to grow your client book? Then think of the Alliances/Outreach committee. For instance, if you're a female lawyer with an affinity for small businesses, you might want to form an alliance with NAWBO, the National Association of Women Business Owners. The Alliances/Outreach committee is also ideal if you're trying to get out of the field altogether and move to another area of activity. If you're a legal marketer with the Chicago chapter of LMA, and you'd like to move into PR, how about establishing an alliance with the Chicago chapter of PRSA, the Public Relations Society of America?

Would you like to gain visibility and credibility in this field? Board membership is ideal if you can swing it; but you could also work through the Public Relations committee to "source file" yourself with journalists. Successful "source filing" (a PR term meaning to be filed by journalist as a good source) means that it's you journalists will call when they have a question. It's the best way to find yourself quoted in a variety of publications, and these are relationships that can last for years.

If you want to meet more people, nothing can beat the Membership committee in terms of sheer volume. However, if you're trying to meet specific people, such as industry leaders from your industry or certain key individuals, the two best committees to join are Events/Programming and Nominating/Election. The main purpose of these committees is to research and evaluate potential

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speakers and board members, which are usually prominent individuals.

If the committee decides to invite these people for a speaking engagement or a board membership, you have a very flattering reason to contact them. And thanks to the committee's research, you know exactly you have in common with each, which is a great way to start a solid business relationship. If they don't make the cut, you've still

gained an edge; thanks to the research, you're more likely to meet them since you now know which causes they patronize and which events they attend. And when you do meet them, you know exactly what the two of you have in common.

BUILD

Before you can have an impact, you're going to have to "pay your dues" and build your credibility. It takes work and time before people start to trust you. Contrary to what you may hear, suggesting lots of new initiatives is not the best way to build

credibility. That's just what might make fellow committee members feel jittery, since they don't trust you yet.

Instead, start small. Ask where you can be of help; ask what needs to be done, and whatever it is, do it. Better yet, see if you can solve a nagging problem that no one had bothered to tackle. Once your credibility is established, you can propose new initiatives such as the ones we've just mentioned. Launch away!

