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The Art of Following Up

by Julia Haskins

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Following up with professional contacts is key to staying connected for small business owners, but knowing what kind of communication, and how much, makes the difference between being sought-after or ignored. These tips will help you determine the right ways to follow up with people in your professional network and avoid overstepping any boundaries.

Follow the Lead

When deciding how to initiate contact, go by your contact's preferred method of communication, says Dianna Booher of the Booher Research Institute in Colleyville, Texas, and author of the new book "What More Can I Say? Why Communication Fails And What to Do About It."

"Observe how they conduct their business," Booher says. "If you called, did they email in response? If you emailed, did they text in response? How do they respond to others? Look, listen, think and adapt."

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Use Good Judgment

The frequency of communication depends on what is typical of the industry and professional group in question, Booher says, but she encourages small business owners to aim for some contact about two to four times a year. Consider an app that will periodically remind you to follow up with your contacts, such as Luper or Bond. Also, be sure to follow your contacts' social media profiles so that you can repost or comment on their content and updates.

"The goal is to stay in touch often enough to have a network in place when you need an answer about a pressing issue, want to spread the word about a PR situation, or need to make a career move," she says.

Of course, it is also possible to be too persistent. When people become increasingly slow to respond, create excuses to delay the conversation, or do not bother to reply, you might need to ease up on your approach, Booher suggests.

Break the Ice

A message need not be elaborate or groundbreaking to be effective. In fact, the simpler the better. Booher has several examples of friendly ice-breakers that are likely to garner a response. Email your business contact about any projects that he or she is currently working on, or the outcome of a recent event. You can also forward a helpful blog post or news item relevant to your contact's interests or industry.

Nudge a Little

Sometimes people just need a little push to get the conversation rolling again. If you have been waiting for an answer to a pressing question for a while, Booher has a handy trick for rebooting the discussion. She recommends sending an email assuming that your business contact has moved in a direction that does not call for your services. Offer your best wishes, and thank the person for his or her consideration.

"If the prospect has not made a decision and the project has simply been delayed, they are often quick to contact you, apologize for keeping you in the dark, and let you know the status and next steps."



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While these guidelines will steer you in the right direction, there is no one-size-fits-all formula for following up with business contacts. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and imagine how he or she would want to be approached. As long as you are friendly, professional and restrained, you will be on your way to making meaningful connections.

Julia Haskins is a technology, health and lifestyle journalist based in New York City.

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