

Newsletter

February 2026



Article1-3
The Power of Networking

Announcements4

Upcoming Training & Events5

Did You Know?5

Article6-7
Giving Back

The Power of Networking: How to Build Meaningful Connections



In the world of small business, the relationships you build can be nearly as important as the product or service you offer. Whether you're looking to attract new clients, find trusted suppliers, or collaborate with other businesses, networking is one of the most powerful tools at your disposal, but effective networking goes beyond exchanging business cards or attending events—it's about creating genuine, lasting connections that can support and sustain your business over time. In this article, we'll explore how small business owners can harness the power of networking to grow their ventures, strengthen their communities, and create new opportunities.

Building Human Connections for Business Solutions

It's important to remember that, while businesses aren't people, they are run by people. If you want to form connections with other businesses, think about the people involved and try to form connections with them. If you can stand out in someone's head as an individual, you are much more likely to form a connection with their company than if you present yourself purely as a business offering a service to another business. When a potential partner needs support, they are much more likely to remember John, who they went to lunch with a few times and is good at this sort of thing, than the company that sent an advertisement about their ability to provide a similar service. With that in mind, let's look at some key concepts of human connectivity that you can bring into your business networking strategy.

Be Available

No matter how good you are at engaging with people, your ability to make connections won't matter if you don't put yourself around people to begin with. As a businessperson, you can put yourself in good networking situations by being active on social media (with both personal and business profiles), maintaining a useful website, attending trade shows, going to town halls, or reaching out to other businesses in your community directly. Put yourself, and your business, out into the world, and be prepared to engage sincerely with the people and businesses you meet. That is the first step to forming connections.

Be Authentic

In a world where corporate speak is so ubiquitous that the phrase conjures up the exact same voice in everyone's mind no matter what field they occupy, having an authentic, unique voice can be a powerful differentiator when it comes to forming connections. As a business, being open and excited about what makes your company unique and valuable makes other people excited to be a part of your network. As a person, being open about your interests and your struggles gives you more chances to relate and form bonds with others.



However, authenticity isn't just about presenting yourself honestly, it's also about engaging authentically. If you aren't sincere in your interest or come off as a corporate schmoozer, people are less likely to be authentic with you, which lowers your odds of forming the connections necessary to build long-term relationships. It's important that you encourage others to be as open and authentic with you as you are with them, and that you listen earnestly when they do. Ask open ended questions to give others space to tell you about what they have to offer and where you can fit into their business plan and respond sincerely to their interests and their concerns.

Be Consistent

As important as a first impression is to kickstarting a relationship, consistency is what keeps those relationships going. Making the effort to stay engaged with businesses you connect with will improve your ability to form meaningful connections that last. Stay in touch through emails, phone calls, and in person meetings whenever you can. Don't go overboard and become an annoyance but do your best to check in regularly so that you can keep yourself in the conversation and develop a deeper connection over time. Handing someone a business card after a good conversation at a trade show is great but inviting them out to lunch a few weeks later is even better.

Be Kind

Business is inherently transactional, but meaningful relationships shouldn't be. Just as the person who is quick to help their neighbors is more likely to have a lot of friends, the business that supports its community is more likely to have a strong network of partners. If you want to form meaningful connections, being quick to offer support where you can is an extremely powerful way of making a strong impression while demonstrating your value. Even if you do this without an immediate return, you aren't losing out by offering aid. By making it clear

that you are good at what you do, pleasant to work with, and genuinely concerned for the success of those who support you, you generate positive interest in your company and make it more likely that those you support, or those who see you supporting them, will return that support in kind. If you recommend your friends' business to new customers, for example, you make yourself look good to both those businesses, who are more likely to refer their customers to you, and to the people you're recommending, who are more likely to see you as trustworthy if they need the services you provide in the future.

Be Patient

Deep relationships don't develop in an instant. If you want to build a meaningful relationship with another business, you need to be ready to make an effort over a long period of time. An invitation to lunch shouldn't be a one-time event, it should be something you follow up on with more invitations down the line. Your support in business should be something you offer regularly, and you don't need to wait for them to be struggling to recommend customers to your partners. By showing you're invested regularly over a long period of time, you develop deeper connections that will build trust, improve your reputation, and help you when you need it.



Be a Friend

The bottom line is that the best way to build connections as a business is to build connections as a human being, both through direct relationships with other businesspeople and through relationships between companies that are built on long-term trust, support, and value. Find companies that fit into your business model, align with your values, and fit in with your culture, and invest in them. With time and care, that investment will come back to you.

Announcements

Important Update on the USDOT Interim Final Rule (IFR) and South Dakota DBE Recertification

The South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) is moving forward with the implementation of the [USDOT's Interim Final Rule \(IFR\)](#), which requires all currently certified DBE firms to complete a full reevaluation under the new federal guidelines.

What's Happening Now

The South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) has added the Personal Narrative Workshop video to our DBE website to assist firms in preparing their Personal Narrative (PN). In addition, we have included links to the following resources:

- [PowerPoint slides from the PN Workshop](#)
- [PN Workbook to guide completion of your PN](#)
- [USDOT's Interim Final Rule homepage](#)

Below are direct links to the PN Workshop video and SDDOT's DBE Reevaluation page:

- [SDDOT Personal Narrative Workshop Video](#)
- [SDDOT DBE Reevaluation Information](#) (Top dropdown menu)

DBEs are encouraged to review the workshop before submitting their narrative to SDDOT.

Next Steps for Firms Interested in Recertification

South Dakota firms who are interested in getting reevaluated for the DBE program should have their Personal Narrative (PN) and Personal Net Worth (PNW) Statement submitted by **March 27th**. Documents can either be emailed to Kyle.Watkins@state.sd.us or firms can contact Kyle Watkins at 605.773.4906 to set up a SharePoint folder to upload their documents.

If firms are unsure at this time, they can submit their PN and PNW Statement at any time to be reevaluated. The firm's DBE status will be considered **inactive** and participation on projects by the firm will not be counted toward the DBE goal until their recertification is complete.

Firms who are not interested in pursuing recertification at this time or who do not plan to retain their DBE certification should contact Kyle Watkins at Kyle.Watkins@state.sd.us to inform SDDOT of their decision.

Current Status of DBE Firms

Under the IFR requirements, all South Dakota DBE firms are temporarily listed as inactive until they complete the reevaluation process.

What This Means for Statewide Goal Setting

Once SDDOT has reviewed and processed all recertification submissions, the department will resume work on DBE goal methodology and development which are a vital part of getting the DBE program started again.

Timely submission will assist SDDOT in establishing its triennial DBE goal by providing a baseline of DBE firms available for DOT projects. This will also enable SDDOT to restart the DBE Program later this summer or early fall.

If you have any questions regarding the IFR and the reevaluation process, please reach out to Kyle Watkins, SDDOT DBE Program Coordinator at 605.773.4906 or Kyle.Watkins@state.sd.us.

Upcoming Training & Events

Feb. 24 **Choosing the Right Business Structure**

Webinar | Tues., February 24, 2026 | 11:00 A.M. CT | Cost: \$10

[Learn More>](#)

Mar. 10 **Manage Your Finances With Confidence Using Scalable Accounting Systems**

Webinar | Tues., March 10, 2026 | 12:00 P.M. CT | Cost: Free

[Learn More>](#)

Mar. 12 **The Women's Business Conference - Aberdeen**

The DEC, 720 Lamont St S, Aberdeen SD 57401 | Thurs., March 12, 2026 | 9:00 A.M. CT | Cost: \$145

[Learn More>](#)

Mar. 18 **5th Annual EmpowHERment Seminar - Lennox**

Prosper Country Warehouse & Event Hall, 46620 278th Street, Lennox SD 57039

Wed., March 18, 2026 | 11:30 A.M. CT | Cost: \$45

[Learn More>](#)

Apr. 8 **Construction Executive's 2026 Q1 Construction Economic Forecast**

Webinar | Wed., April 8, 2026 | 12:00 P.M. MT | Cost: Free

[Learn More>](#)

Did you know?

Personal Narrative Assistance Available for SD DBEs

Project Solutions Inc. is the Supportive Services provider for SDDOT and is available for one-on-one assistance to SD DBEs who would like help drafting their personal narrative for the recertification process.

If you were unable to attend one of the live Personal Narrative workshops, we encourage you to review the recorded session before scheduling a one-on-one meeting with PSI. The recording can be found on the [SDDOT's DBE Reevaluation page](#) under the top dropdown menu.

To schedule time with a consultant, email dbe@projectsolutionsinc.com.



Giving Back: How to Support Your Local Community

Small businesses are much more reliant on local communities than their larger counterparts. Their neighbors make up more of their customers, more their funding comes from local sources, and their employees are more often hired close to home, so when a small business succeeds, it can be a great opportunity to give back to the community that supported its journey. Luckily, the connection between business and their neighbors goes both ways, and small businesses have a unique capacity to create meaningful impacts that matter to the people who helped them succeed. By actively engaging with their community, small business owners can cultivate loyalty and enhance their brand reputation while drive positive change and improving their neighborhoods. In this article, we will look at a few ideas that can give you a chance to ensure that your successes benefit the community that made them possible.

Supporting Your Community Supports You

It is important to recognize that giving back is not something that you do to support your community at the expense of your company. Rather, it benefits your business to do so. Being a positive force in your neighborhood can improve the lifestyles of the people in it, which gives you access to customers with more money and employees with more talent and higher productivity. It also gives you a chance to put your company's name on events that its stakeholders view positively, which increases brand awareness and improves customer loyalty.



The benefits of giving back to your community can be immediately seen through people seeing your logo tied to a cause they support and becoming a customer, or they can be impossible to measure and only become apparent in the long term as your environment improves and your profitability improves with it, but they do exist. As we look at some ways to give back, it may be tempting to see that they cost money or time and discount them to protect your bottom line – and you absolutely should not feel pressured to do more than your business can handle – but remember that giving back to your community improves your business's prospects, so think of these suggestions not as sacrifices, but as investments in your own future as well as the futures of those around you.

Support Local Events and Organizations

Perhaps the most famous way for businesses to give back to their communities is by putting their weight behind organizations and events that matter to them. If you are looking for a way to start giving back and your business has the time and funds to do so, try looking for organizations you support around your business and get in touch to find out how you can help. Common organizations for this kind of support are nonprofits that operate in your area, schools, or community led events that support causes that align with your company's values. Many groups will be willing to give your company marketing in return for this support by listing you as a sponsor, including your branding in their material, or shouting you out at the event. This kind of support is a great way to put your money to work for the people around you while increasing awareness of your brand.

If, as you look at ways in which you want to help your community, you find that there is a lack of existing organizations supporting the causes you want to advance, you can also host events on your own. Staging your own events gives you more direct control over the ways in which your time and money helps your community, and this can create more significant changes over time. There may be other people around you who want to be helping but don't know how, so creating momentum by offering those people a chance to gather, show their support, and learn what they can do to help may snowball into the creation of more specifically devoted groups who can carry the torch for you.



Volunteer

A great way to show that your company is involved in its community using time instead of money is volunteering. As a business owner, volunteering personally can be extremely effective as it makes you feel more personal to the people around you and gives you a chance to develop connections, but including your business can increase your impact. You can get your employees involved by informing them of events and encouraging them to sign up to go together, or by creating events your company can do on its own to support its community. The effectiveness of these strategies will likely be dramatically improved if time spent at company-sanctioned charity events is considered work time that is eligible for pay or other rewards.

Outside of group events, you can encourage further volunteering outside of work by offering rewards for time spent volunteering with organizations that the company supports. These rewards can be monetary, like offering extra vacation time, or nonmonetary, like giving employees who do significant community work a shout out in company newsletters.



Donate

On the other hand, an effective way to support your community with money instead of time is through donations. Businesses usually have more funds to distribute than individuals, so giving money to causes you support on its own can be very helpful, but if you involve your employees or your community in your giving you can expand your ability to help and the opportunities to be recognized for it. This can be as simple as including donation links to nonprofits your organization is giving to in social media posts you make to give viewers a convenient way to follow your example.

More complex methods of involvement, however, can be even more effective. Offering to match donations made in support of a nonprofit your company sponsors gives you the chance to give that group more money than you could donate alone. Just like volunteering, offering rewards to employees who donate to causes your company supports can be a great way to encourage giving and build team morale.