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Top 5 reasons to continue networking during a down economy

The past year has been rough. We've experienced one of the worst recessions since the Great Depression, and unemployment numbers have skyrocketed. Fortunately, the media's reports on the economy seem to be taking a turn. Whether you agree with this assessment is a completely different story.

Many employees' reaction to the economy has been to hunker down and prove their value to management so that come downsizing time, they don't find themselves on the chopping block. Naturally, we want to avoid activities that could be considered frivolous. But if there's one professional development avenue that's more important than ever, it's networking. Networking is to an individual what marketing is to a company. Like a business that wants to survive the recession and foster long-term growth, individuals must market themselves, and that is accomplished through networking.

As the saying goes, "It's not what you know, but who you know." Whether looking to build contacts, grow a business or find a job or employee, networking is extremely important. Networking is crucial to business development, as well as professional development for the following reasons:

1. Online social networking is fine, but in-person networking generates business. Many people use social-networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook to build a business network. These are great ways to stay connected with other professionals; however, to really develop relationships and build business, you need to meet people in person. Face-to-face networking allows professionals to develop a personal

relationship with their network, which cannot be developed using social-networking sites.

2. Opportunity comes from making new connections. Your network is what you fall back on if something happens to your business or your job. In this uncertain economy, many jobs are not as secure today as they once were. Furthermore, many businesses are discovering that even long-term clients are shopping around for better business opportunities. As clients can easily come and go, and employment can change with the blink-of-an-eye, a great list of contacts can be your safety net if the unexpected occurs.

3. You can learn from meeting other successful people. The best way to learn how something is done is to observe someone else in action. Building relationships with others through networking is a terrific way to learn from others who are successful in areas that may be new to you.

4. Learn something new about the Twin Cities. Many of the networking events in the Twin Cities are at unique and interesting venues, offering opportunities that might not otherwise be available to the general public. Furthermore, many of the groups offering networking events host speakers and encourage discussion about the issues that matter to those who work and live in the Twin Cities.

5. Networking is good for your psyche. Leaving the confines of your office can be the best way to gain perspective on your competitors, customers and the market. Networking events provide an interesting and fun atmosphere to meet new people and break away from the rigors of the typical workday, which is often exactly what businesses and employees need to survive in this economy.

There are many networking opportunities available to business owners and executives in the Twin Cities, among them:

1. DRIVE-Emerging Leaders is a program of the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce (minneapolischamber.org). The group's mission is to develop and retain talented young business professionals in the Twin Cities. DRIVE hosts monthly roundtable discussions, as well as quarterly social events and philanthropic activities.

2. Leadership Twin Cities is a nine-month program also sponsored by the Minneapolis chamber designed to provide emerging community leaders with an understanding of the issues affecting the region. Participants meet the second Thursday of each month, from September through May, for a full day of networking activities. Fifty-five participants are chosen each year through an application process.

3. United Way Emerging Leaders (unit-edwaytwincities.org) is an organization designed to facilitate the growth of young professionals in the Twin Cities area through a regular leadership speaker series and programs.

4. Firestorm is a business-networking organization focused on both online and face-to-face business networking. Firestorm (myfirestorm.com) has weekly chapter meetings, as well as social events to promote business.

5. SHARP UpSwing (sharpupswing.com) hosts five business expos each year, attracting business professionals and industry leaders throughout the Twin Cities.

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