



# HOW TO GET SOMEONE TO INTRODUCE THEIR CLIENTS TO YOU

**BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH**

For professional services firms, referrals are the holy grail of business development. After all, potential clients that come via referral are usually already convinced by the quality of your services and ready to buy. That means they cost less to acquire than other clients (ie you generally don't have to spend much, if anything, on marketing to them before making a sale). They also have fewer qualms about paying your fees (there's the social proof of the referrer already paying them). And, to top it off, they're often more likely to remain with you for the long-term, at least in my experience.

At the same time, winning a lot of referral work still takes a lot of skill and application - it's just that you need to be able to cultivate referrers in the first instance rather than clients.

So how do you do just that and convert your colleagues, clients, friends and associates into referral sources? I've set out six steps I think every professional should take.

## **1. REMIND THEM ABOUT WHAT YOU DO**

One of the biggest obstacles to referrals happens when potential referral sources aren't aware that you can help out. The only way to overcome this is to let them know.

To do this, you need to be talking to them and reminding them about what it is you do. So catch potential internal referrers at the water cooler or coffee cart or the office aspidistra and talk about what you're working on. (Don't be a braggart, ask them what they're doing too). Arrange a coffee to shoot the breeze with external referrers too.

You should also be writing and speaking about your expertise and sharing that information with potential referrers. So write up a case study showing how you've helped a client recently, publish some notes from your firm's most recent CPD session, send out that newsletter you've been holding off on.

## **2. KEEP YOUR MESSAGE SIMPLE**

While we're on the same topic, it's not a potential referrer's fault if they don't understand what you do. It's yours. In other words, your work may be complex but your message should never be. One of the real keys to any form of business communication is to keep it simple and interesting enough for the listener to want more .

I'm no fan of the elevator pitch but, at the same time, the worst thing you should try is to be everything to everyone. One way to slim it down is to write down what you do in 50 words. Then cut it back to 25. Then halve it again. You may even get to a [six-word story](#).

The other part of getting your message across should be to bang the drum repeatedly but not excessively. Some marketers swear by the 'Rule of 7' in this regard. This says that anyone - in this case your referrer - needs to hear your message seven times before they take action. Again, your

articles, newsletters and seminars - as well as informal chats about what you're up to - have an enormous role to play here.

### **3. BE NICE**

One of my favourite ever HBR articles was a 2005 piece by Casciaro & Lobo on "Competent Jerks, Loveable Fools and the Formation of Social Networks". What it reveals is that, while people value partnering with competent professionals, the characteristic that many people value most is likeability. So while skill and likeability are a winning combination, skill without likeability (ie the competent jerk) means someone will usually struggle against someone incompetent but nice.

So, if you're a smart professional who can be a bit sneering, scornful or downright skanky it's time to lose the 'tude. No matter how good you are at your job, many people will choose to refer work to someone nicer.

The good news on this front though is that, according to the same article, likeability can be manufactured. By becoming more familiar, emphasising similarities and encouraging bonding, not-so-nice people can actually start to become more personable.

### **4. DO THINGS IN PERSON**

Thanks to social media and email and so on we hear from each other more than ever before. But as far as I can tell, we probably actually see each other less often than ever. And yet, there are so many advantages to seeing someone in the flesh. When you're face-to-face you have the chance to read body language; you're more likely to receive the unfiltered impromptu, unscripted truth; and you can have a more authentic and meaningful conversation.

Most of all, it's during these face-to-face meetings - especially ad hoc and informal ones - where knowledge is most often created or shared, according to a study of 3,500 scientists that worked on the Large Hadron Collider. On the other hand, it has been found that relying on company intranets to disseminate information can actually inhibit knowledge.

The moral of the story? If you really want to know people and what they do and have them know you and what you do (an essential for a referral-based relationship), you're going to have to get out from behind your desk.

### **5. PRACTISE THE PLATINUM RULE**

We all know the golden rule about treating other people the way you want to be treated yourself. To cultivate referrers I think you need to go even one better and practise the platinum rule - which is to treat other people the way they want to be treated.

This involves putting yourself in their shoes and doing what they want you to do when it comes to the referral relationship, especially after they've introduced you to someone.

For me, this means copying them into your emails with any referral they send your way (at least where it's reasonable - I'm not suggesting you start disclosing a client's confidential information to them). I also think it involves picking up the phone or dropping into their office at regular intervals to let them know how any relationship is progressing. If they want to be kept up with what's happening in the client's business do this too.

And be on the lookout for any opportunities to send their way too - referrals should always be a two-way street where possible.

You can read more about how the referral relationship should work here ([How To Repay A Referral When You Can't Refer Back](#)).

## 6. MAKE THE FIRST MOVE

If there's one saying that's wrong from start to finish it's that "good things come to those who wait". Good things never have and never will happen to people who sit on the sidelines. Good things come to the proactive.

So, if you really want to turn someone into a source of referrals, it's incumbent on you to be the one who does it. Go and speak to a potential referrer today (or tomorrow if you're reading this at night) and make the first move. Tell them what it is you do and what you want. Listen to what it is they do and want. Offer to introduce them to your contacts. Find out how you can help them get to where they want to be.

If it feels uncomfortable, that's a good thing. Many of your rivals will be feeling that very same feeling and it will cause them to do nothing. By being bold and taking the initiative you immediately give yourself the upper hand.

Now... go get 'em, tiger!

## WANT MORE?

If you'd like to know how to cultivate referrers, email [Sue-Ella](#) or [get in touch](#).

## FURTHER READING

Tiziana Casciaro & Miguel Sousa Lobo (2005) [Competent Jerks, Loveable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks](#), HBR June Issue

Christopher Mabey & Sasha Zhao (2017) [Managing Five Paradoxes of Knowledge Exchange in Networked Organisations](#), HRM Journal

Dan Pink (2013) [Six Elevator Pitches for the 21st Century](#) (YouTube 4:45 duration)

Sue-Ella Prodonovich [How to Repay A Referral When You Can't Refer Back](#)



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