

P R O F I T * A B I L I T Y

Niche Networking

Make your customers your best salespeople

By KEVIN CAMPBELL

Some video production companies are profiting quite nicely during the downsizing '90s without spending a dime on "traditional" advertising. The key to profitability in these recessionary times is to find a niche in your market that's underserved and let the members of your niche do most of your advertising and marketing for you.

The way you spread good word-of-mouth among your market niche is through personal contacts, or networking. Although it sounds like a power term left over from the '80s, networking is a solid, proven way to make contacts with potential customers. Here are a few ways you can rub shoulders with the right people to get out the good word about your video business.

Niche Picking

It's best to select a market niche that's underserved, or one that your competitors are ignoring. If you shoot weddings, consider pursuing the growing Hispanic, Thai, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Haitian special event markets. Or go after new markets among your previous customers, such as taping births, baptisms, christenings, and other child-related ceremonies.

If you shoot legal depositions, consider niches such as expert testimony, day-in-the-life tapes, or depositions for out-of-town law firms.

Kevin Campbell is an independent video producer and the author of Make Money with Your Camcorder and The Joy of



Spread good will by offering your services to your kids' school.

Corporate and industrial customers offer unlimited niches. Choose one you have some background or experience in, such as computers, personnel management, factory operations, a foreign language, engineering, or an

A favor for a contact now may mean a referral from her later.



intimate knowledge of a company's products. Any of these could supply you with several niches to go after.

One final word about niches: don't pick one you know nothing about or one you don't know anyone in. You can't network without contacts or knowledge of your subject.

Become Active in Your Community

After you pick your niche, you need to connect with those in that niche who can spread the good word about you. The best way to start making contacts is to become an active member of your community.

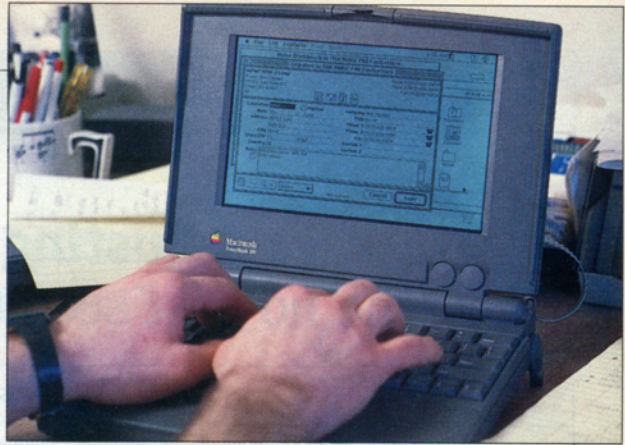
Do volunteer work for local nonprofit organizations.

Offer to produce a video for an organization that can't afford to hire you. Fax a press release to all local newspapers and radio and TV stations prior to the shoot so they can do a story on you during production.

The Boy Scouts of America awards merit badges for film and video production. Offer to sponsor and train any Scout who wants to work for his merit badge. Again, fax a press release to all local media.

Volunteer to make calls for community pledge drives, or to answer phones for the local public broadcasting station. There's a good chance the people you meet while volunteering are people who will be happy to tell others about how helpful and wonderful you are.

Involve your children. If you have kids, attend PTA meetings. Meet teachers and other parents, and make sure you mention your line of work. Offer to give presentations to local schools about the exciting field of



Local radio announcers may have inside information about companies you need. Make contact, then keep in touch.

video production. Again, fax those press releases!

Write a column for the local newspaper. If you shoot weddings, write about why couples should videotape as well as photograph their weddings. If you shoot industrials, write for the local business section on ways training videos can save a company money.

Be a nice person. The most successful businesspeople often come from a sales background where likability is paramount. People do business with people they like; although service and quality are extremely important, they are secondary reasons for why a client hires you. If you don't have strong people skills, or you're a temperamental video artist, clients will steer clear of you and hire videographers more enjoyable to be with.

Treat every person you shake hands with as a potential advertiser for your company. You never know who you are talking to; the grocery clerk might be an important contact for someone in your market niche.

Make Yourself a Presence in Your Niche

Once your community knows about you, make sure the potential customers in your niche know about you, too—and start talking about you.

Join the associations, clubs, and organizations members of your target niche belong to. These can be museum and aquarium associations; community theater groups; dance, literature, and art clubs; or religious organizations. Steer clear of politically oriented clubs; politics and business mix like gasoline and a match. Check newspaper society pages for events and stories about prominent members of your niche group.

If you shoot weddings, you can increase your chances for referrals if you:

- Belong to a house of worship.
- Attend functions at that house of worship.

- Ask for referrals. Congregation members will often go out of their way to recommend you if you just ask them to.

- Acquire baking skills. You'd be surprised at how a homemade pecan pie will get people talking about you.

For industrial and corporate clients, hang out in places the corporate types like to relax, such as golf courses and athletic clubs. Remember the studio executive in *The Player* who went to AA meetings because that's where all the deals were made? In the old days, deals were made in bars and restaurants; today, it's leisure and fitness settings. Hit the links, take aerobics classes, and lift weights when the decision-makers are likely to be around.

Get to know people who can refer you. If you're after corporate clients, secretaries can be your most trusted inside source, since bosses often ask their opinions. Secretaries may appreciate receiving flowers, baked goods, gift certificates, and cash referral incentives (commonly known as bribes and kickbacks).

If you shoot legal videos, court reporters make great networking contacts. Meet them through court

reporting schools and trade associations. Offer a cash incentive for jobs they refer to you. Make stronger contacts by creating an audiotape dub of each deposition you shoot and giving it to the court reporter assigned to the case (it's much easier to transcribe from an audiocassette than a videotape).

If you shoot weddings, you should network with other people and companies servicing your wedding niche, such as caterers, bridal gown and tuxedo shops, DJs and bands, and hotels with reception halls and honeymoon suites. You may also find that your competitors are your best allies if they believe the theory that it's better to refer clients when you're booked than to say you can't help them.

Get to know radio station announcers. These are great people to know. Hire one to do a voiceover for your next project and spend time talking. They don't charge a fortune and know tons of inside information about companies looking to do media projects. Announcers can also get you leftover station giveaway items, such as restaurant certificates and movie passes you can use

continued on page VP-45

A satisfied client can be your best advertisement—if you ask correctly.



cant contributions to the onslaught of new products at the NAB, including a widescreen, high-def VTR that is compatible with S-VHS, no less! For editing, JVC announced a new Edit-Desk system, featuring the BR-S800U recorder and companion player and edit controller for fast time code editing, all for less than \$8,000. New high-quality, low-light cameras were introduced as was a high-performance 3-CCD camera for image processing and remote applications.

Those are just some of the millions of pieces of gear to come out of this year's show. Our favorite intro involved another camera announcement, this one by Avid Technology. That's right, a camera announcement by Avid (of course, it was in conjunction with famed camera manufacturer Ikegami). The announcement was an agreement for the two companies to produce a field camera with a dockable disk recorder. Stop and think about it. Shoot, pop the disk out of the camera and into your desktop editing system. No tape, no compression hassle, just direct to digital pictures. It's coming to a camera near you—in, maybe, five years. •

PROFIT*ABILITY

continued from page VP-41

to induce and reward a client. Again, a cash referral incentive can work wonders. So can a nice lunch.

Attend every party you can. Drink tea and spend your time meeting people. More impressions are made and deals closed at parties and get-togethers than you could ever imagine.

Use Your Contacts

Once you've gotten to know people in your niche, stay in front of them.

Keep records. Maintain a running file of personal client information. Use it to send birthday cards, flowers, gifts, and mailings. Computerized personal information managers can remind you when to mail, and don't forget to update your trusty Rolodex with client information and business cards.

Stay in touch with all your contacts. People get promoted. A secretary you talked to six months ago may head her own company today.

Trade referrals with other production companies and TV stations. Nei-

ther you nor your competitors can handle every customer who calls. Maintain professional relationships so you can trade referrals with one another. Get to know your competitors' shooters and editors, who will be more likely to refer jobs to you than salespeople.

Ask for a referral after the sale. This is very important, especially during the warm-and-fuzzy-feeling stage right after the client sees the new tape. But phrase your question carefully: "Who can you recommend who can also use my video services?" Never ask *if* they know someone. Offer incentives for a referral, such as free video copies or cash payments. And always ask your clients to tell their friends about you.

Niche networking is a powerful tool for producing profitable results. It's also very inexpensive compared to the costs of traditional advertising.

Remember, though, that niche marketing is like planting crops: don't expect results overnight. Not every seed will sprout, but in time enough will. And you'll be a wealthier videographer for it. •

Announcing The Formation Of The PVAA

The associaton was formed with the cooperation of 12 local videographers associations around the country. The result?

- A new national professional association
- Caters to video entrepreneurs: wedding, industrial and event videographers

PROFESSIONAL VIDEOGRAPHERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

PVAA Mission:

"The PVAA is an information, research, education and support organization for the advancement of professional videography."

PVAA • Post Office Box 450 • Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ 07423 • Fax: (201) 445-2160