

Network your way to sales success

It's hard to beat personal referrals when it comes to conjuring up new business, writes **Sandra O'Connell**

Elaina Fitzgerald, whose family owns the Woodland House hotel in Adare, Co Limerick, and the Vienna Woods in Glanmire, Co Cork, trains all her staff to be sales oriented.

When a customer's car broke down in the car park, a member of staff stepped in to help. The two chatted while a mechanic was found. As it turned out, the same customer booked hotel accommodation for a large organisation in the region. The interchange generated a steady flow of new business for the hotel.

"When the recession came, I had to do something to drive sales," said Fitzgerald. In 2010 she and local business owners set up a "chapter" of Business Network International (BNI), a referral network.

Members honed their sales pitches and referred business to one another whenever possible. Over the next five years the chapter generated in excess of €1m a year for the group.

"Membership adds about 5% to our turnover each year, which was a huge help in the downturn," said Fitzgerald. "And the sales training I learnt from the group has helped me capitalise on the opportunities that arise as the economy recovers."

Fitzgerald even ran a networking workshop for staff explaining how to look through personal and professional networks for chances to generate sales. All sorts of opportunities opened up, such as reciprocal relationships with one old college friend who is now working in an airline, and someone running a local taxi company, according to Fitzgerald. "Not everyone is working in sales," she said, "but sales is now a part of everybody's job."

Small-business owners "are good at going out there and making a sales pitch to a prospective customer, they are not so good at selling through others", said Sandra Hart, executive director of BNI Ireland South and West (bni.ie).

"Yet, if someone tells you about a good film, or a great hairdresser, or a good place to eat, personal referral makes all the difference."

The key is knowing your target advocates. "I know lots of business owners whose own mother wouldn't know exactly what it is they do and who they want to sell to," she said.

Staff can be the business owner's greatest ally. "It's not about learning off



BRIAN GAVIN/PRESS 22

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sales people, hates to think they are professionally trained to sell stuff, because there's an element of being hoodwinked," said Clayton. "We try to explain how people buy, how the world looks from the other side of the table."

Acumen, a programme run by cross-border business development body InterTradeIreland (intertradeireland.com/acumen), subsidises up to half the cost of the salary of a full-time salesperson for the first year.

Robert McCarroll focused his energies on establishing Belfast-based fabrication and welding company Cimpina as a specialist in the maritime and aerospace industries. "We were heavily reliant on our major customers and had become complacent in terms of seeking new business and developing our product portfolio," he said. "We just didn't have the space and time to breathe or to seek out new opportunities and new methodologies."

He wanted a salesperson who could prospect for new sales by directly contacting potential leads, update the company's marketing tools and source tendering opportunities. He signed up for Acumen in 2014 and the result has been a 20% increase in business.

Crucially Cimpina also introduced a new customer relationship management (CRM) system. "Sales isn't about sending someone good looking out to tell people how great their product is," said Michael Fitzgerald of OnePageCRM, an Irish CRM company. "It's about building confidence over time."

Confidence comes less from big sales pitches and more from the cumulative effect of micro-engagements built up over time, "the little nudges a good CRM system prompts", he said.

For Joe Toomey, sales director of Irish TV, a producer of original TV content with offices in Ireland, the UK and US, OnePageCRM, which costs from €11 a month, has been a welcome addition.

It tracks sales on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis. "I can see all the conversations across the whole team, the value of every customer to us, how much each has spent, what they did or didn't like about us and our conversion rates," he said.

Any CRM system is only as good as the people using it, however. "CRM is very much a GIGO situation – you put garbage in, you get garbage out," said Toomey.

Do it right, however, and it's a huge boon.

a spiel and doing a hard sell, but investing in that education so that, if they happen to be out in the pub and someone is organising a christening, they should know your hotel is a great venue, and why," said Hart.

"You could have 200 staff and a sales team of five. Yet if every member of staff brings in one piece of referral business over a year, that's 200 new pieces of business a year."

Local enterprise offices (localenterprise.ie) run subsidised sales training programmes. Fingal Local Enterprise Office, for example, is offering a workshop for €40. Plato (plato.dublin.ie and www.platocork.ie), a development network for small-business owners, provides subsidised training courses for members, including in sales training.

Derek Carter, of Thrive Consulting,

has run a number of these courses, including for Plato. He believes that Irish businesses rely too heavily on establishing connections. "We tend to build our relationships through who you know and who you play golf with," he said. "But you can't take it for granted that just because you know one another, they are going to keep buying from you."

The recession increased buyers' professionalism, and a determination to seek value, he said. It also takes time to build up a relationship based on knowing a customer's family and broader network and "people don't have time for that any more", according to Carter.

Prospective customers are expert in their own business and are more than likely expert in your product – and

Fitzgerald says membership of Business Network International adds 5% to turnover of her hotel business each year

those of your competitors, said Carter. "You can decommittise yourself by bringing the kind of insights that you, as a salesperson visiting companies like theirs all the time, should be able to bring," he said.

Even the smallest business can use online testimonials to sell. "The most important thing is to build trust," added Carter. "It doesn't matter if you've a butcher shop or a small accountancy practice, I may not trust you when you tell me your business is great; I am inclined to trust other people, who look like me, when they tell me your business is great."

It's not about manipulation. "The problem with sales training of the past was that too much was about tactics and techniques," said Carter.

Most small companies are hatched

by people with no sales training, said Alan Clayton, a business coach with SOS Ventures (SOSV), a venture capital company. They have an idea for a product or service and spend their time thinking about developing it – and only then realise they have to sell it too.

SOSV previously ran a sales accelerator in Cork called Sel8r, and has relaunched the programme in San Francisco as HAX Boost (hax.co).

The lack of a professional sales staff member does not necessarily impede a start-up. "Most buyers actually like to buy from makers rather than from sellers, which is why founders should in fact be the best person to sell their product," said Clayton.

To succeed, he adds, founders need to learn not just how to sell, but rather how buyers buy. "Everyone, including

I put a clean-up program into hard drive to make our computers greener

PAUL MAHER features in a new US documentary, *Death by Design*, which investigates the environmental cost of the international electronics industry. It is an issue close to the Dubliner's heart, as his innovative, eco-friendly wooden-cased computers have won awards around the world.

Before pioneering sustainable technology, and helping Hollywood expose the dirty secrets behind our digital dependency, Maher learned about computers via a series of jobs in Dublin. He left Syng Street school in 1979, landing an apprenticeship in radio and TV repairs at rental firm RTV. After 10 years he completed a FAS training course in computer networking before landing a job with Reflex Computers, part of the DCC group, carrying out component level repairs on mainframes, printers and personal computers. When that firm went into liquidation, he set up on his own.

"The business was originally called Multimedia Computer Systems, but all of a sudden everyone was talking about multimedia – DVDs, CDs, PCs all in the one box – so we changed it to MicroPro in 1993," he said.

Maher's sister-in-law Anne Galligan left a job with Allied Irish Banks to help him set up the company. It was a risk, but she knew he had former Reflex clients, including big names such as Independent Newspapers and CRH. Maher's work involved maintaining the PCs, printers, networks and software of existing clients, and, where

possible, finding new clients and fitting out their systems from scratch.

A nature lover since childhood, he was soon irked by the amount of waste the industry generated. "The amount of carcinogens in computers is phenomenal and much of it ends up as waste, with materials thrown out," he said. "Software was updating quicker than the hardware, every three years companies were replacing their computer systems, and nearly all of it was going to landfill."

He decided to design a longer-lasting PC. "I thought, what if I could build an upgradable, repairable, reusable computer?"

With a traditional PC everything is on one main integrated board inside the box. "So, if one piece goes, it all goes, which means the machine is only as good as its weakest link," said Maher. "It's cheaper for big makers to do it this way. And, because every three years is like a new generation for computers, people just get rid of them. I decided to use a modular design instead."

He designed a machine where all the parts could be separately replaced and upgraded. Pitching himself against the might of giants such as Dell and HP, he launched the MicroPro PC in 1999 and immediately sought ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 quality standards as an effective way of establishing credibility. He also competed on service. "Our customers liked the fact that we can repair all our products for up

HOW I MADE IT
Paul Maher
Managing director of MicroPro

to 10 years and that, once they have come to the end of their useful life in computing, we will take them back and repurpose them into cash registers and use the glass for emergency lighting systems," he said. "Our carbon footprint is very small."

Amazingly, given the scale of the competition, he also managed to compete on price. "You have to remember, the big makers operate on very

big margins. And we do the set-up for our customers."

He set his heart on winning an EU Ecolabel, the badge of honour for environmental standards, but was told that given the mercury, lead, PVCs, plastics and brominated flame retardants used in the computer industry, it would be impossible for a PC to win it. Undeterred, Maher stripped out the carcinogenic materials to build the lamEco computer.

"Nature ensures oil-based carbons are buried deep in the earth where they can't cause trouble, yet we humans go out of our way to dig down and strip them out. With lamEco we don't use any oil-based carbon at all. We use wood."

His design also did away with peripherals such as mice and keyboards in favour of a touchscreen. Unfortunately, as a small firm, getting the machine certified across Europe was a difficult process. In the meantime, Apple's revolutionary iPad launched and stole his thunder.

"Though we had the technological skills, we didn't have the management skills to capitalise on it. The company was built on service and having great engineers." Still, in 2010 he secured the Ecolabel certification he had been aiming for. This was followed up by industry design awards and invitations to speak across Europe.

The company is currently designing a new "sustainably smart" tablet device using funds from Horizon 2020, an EU research programme. The project excites Maher, but his goal is not financial. "If I was

in this for the money I could have sold the business 10 times over. We're not designing environmentally sustainable computers to get rich," he said.

Maher is also an advocate for apprenticeship in the workplace and a committed employer of people with special needs. This he attributes to the enriching experience of growing up with his younger sister Noirin, who died last Christmas.

"Coming from a special needs family gives you a very different perspective on things," he said. "You realise it's a very small world we live on and that we're here for a very short time."

Maher believes all manufacturing businesses should operate on a design-for-reuse basis. His products will age gracefully as the wooden housing matures.

The future belongs to green businesses like his, he argues. "It's about not doing your employing – and your polluting – on the other side of the world. The future will be all about small-scale manufacturing and it will be done locally. Technological solutions will be created in a much more environmentally-friendly and sustainable way."

SANDRA O'CONNELL



BRYAN MEADE

Maher, with Anne Galligan, builds 'upgradable, repairable, resusable' machines to minimise waste

AIB Consumer Reference Rate Changes effective from 16th August 2016

Current: Base Lending Rate*	0.000%	Previous: Base Lending Rate*	0.000%
Current: Prime Interest Rate**	0.125%	Previous: Prime Interest Rate**	0.125%
Current: Credit Line Interest Rate	2.125%	Previous: Credit Line Interest Rate	2.125%

* This rate is only available for facilities in excess of 50,000

** This rate is not available for new loan facilities

Facilities based on these reference rates are also subject to an agreed interest margin

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