

## Self-marketing as an independent practitioner



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As an independent practitioner, I'm well aware that I'm competing with plenty of others in this industry – other independents, as well as the big names.

### WORD OF MOUTH WORKS

The nature of career work means that word-of-mouth and personal recommendation works best.

Many people starting out in consultancy may think that word-of-mouth referrals are not something you can or should influence. However, you are working in a business environment and if you believe you are offering a good service, there is nothing wrong in asking your clients to promote your work. The principle of networking is the same as if you're looking for a job.

### KEY TIPS

Don't just think that the person who hired you is the only or the best person to recommend you. People you train or counsel will have many contacts, especially if you are working at a senior level, and they are in a better position to talk about how they have benefited personally.

To maximise the impact, get the basics right. You have to make sure that your clients know the full range of services you offer and your contact details. Don't rely on their memories – make sure they all have your business card and a simple brochure. Make sure you keep in touch with people you have worked with. Traditionally people have sent Christmas cards, but you might use an electronic newsletter or a

creative tool such as a digest of the latest training research.

Finally, make sure you thank those who have helped you. You could either give them a small gift, or look for ways to help them in a similar manner.

Recommending services is a two-way process.

### MAKE YOUR WEBSITE WORK FOR YOU

Having an excellent website is key to supporting the personal referrals. My website is my prime marketing resource, working on my behalf when I'm out. So it's important that it properly reflects my personality and approach.

A website also needs to be practical and usable. One of the guiding principles of website design is the 'three-clicks-rule'. Research shows that the majority of web users will leave a website if they cannot find what they are looking for within three clicks of their mouse. They can equally be put off by long animations or mandatory software downloads. Use the website to showcase your work – ask your clients if you can list them and write a summary of the work you have undertaken. Highlight your professional qualifications and personal experience and include testimonials.

If you want people to come back to your website over time, think about including a simple 'weblog', an online diary. This also helps stamp your personality on the site.

### USE THE MEDIA

I've been fortunate enough to have some media

profiling which has resulted in business. Initially the media contact just fell my way, but I'm now having greater success by driving this proactively.

Journalists are busy people who often have a very short time to write an article. You therefore need to be quick on your feet, confident and able to come up with good 'soundbites'. Like all skills, this develops well with practice.

Relationships with journalists can be developed through networking. Keep in touch with them (but don't call them every day!), and send them short ideas for future features and your thoughts on news stories. Make sure you learn their working patterns and the areas they are interested in. One key issue with media coverage is that it is most effective if you use the coverage repeatedly. Few people read every relevant newspaper and magazine article, but if you alert clients and contacts of the coverage, your credibility will rise. There are copyright issues around reproducing much media coverage, but you can always link to media websites, and reprint other articles for a fee. Other good ways of using the media are to take opportunities where possible to speak at conferences and to write articles for professional journals.

### DON'T CALL COLD

Totally cold calling is something which doesn't work. Occasionally, I contact local firms who are going through change and where I think I can add some value,

but it's not resulted in any work. Firms will get many similar calls and if you don't stand out in some way, you won't get the meeting. However, targeting specific firms and keeping in touch over time can lead to success.

### USE YOUR MEMBERSHIPS

Finally, being aligned to an international professional organisation also boosts your standing. Membership of ACP International means that, even though I am an independent, I am associated with a powerful message about service to clients. It also gives me access to a wide range of national and international support and allows me to network, increasing the 'word of mouth' success outlined above.

### STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD

A wise American, Joseph Campbell, once said: "The worst thing that can befall a person is to spend your life climbing the ladder, only to find at the end of your life that it was leaning against the wrong wall".

Any career professional would do well to adopt the prevention of Campbell's disaster as their mission statement and any client of a career professional ought to be expecting that kind of help.

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