

BUSINESS CONNECTIONS



Partnering to Achieve

Home Telecom helps BCI keep costs down

Sharon Merryman (left), Home Telecom Business Sales Representative, works with Alice Shook, Executive Director of BCI

HOME
TELECOM

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BUSINESS CONNECTIONS

Partnerships are at the core of what we do at Home Telecom. We continually strive to build successful partnerships with our customers and community by developing strong relationships, exploring opportunities for win-win situations, and joining forces to achieve common goals.

In this February issue of *Business Connections*, you'll find several articles with advice on maintaining successful relationships with your customers, vendors, and colleagues. On page 3, we share tips on how your small business can enhance partnerships through online networking. Then on pages 4 and 5, the topic is communications etiquette, followed on page 6 with a look at the influence of social media on purchasing decisions.

Our Business Spotlight article is on Berkeley Citizens, Inc. (BCI), a nonprofit human service organization whose goal is to help individuals with lifelong developmental disabilities. I'm pleased to say that BCI and Home Telecom are community partners on several levels; we provide them with communications services that fit their budget as well as make contributions to assist with some of their programs.

Clearly, communities thrive when partnerships are formed and helping hands are extended. At Home Telecom, we remain committed to community service and look forward to what we'll be able to achieve together.

Sincerely,

William S. Helmly
President & COO
Home Telecom



live life ahead.

Make More **Connections** With **Online Networking**



How your small business can get started and see results

Networking used to take place mainly at local business events (not to mention golf courses). Now online networking is more important than in-person networking for many people, due to its reach and efficiency.

Online networking lets you connect with people around the world who may become customers, colleagues, suppliers, advisors, and friends. It could even move you from obscurity to fame; for example, blogging sometimes leads to a book, which can lead to expert status for the author.

Get started with a few of the basics such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, forums, or blogs. You don't need to be everywhere in the social media space; determine what works best for your business and focus your attention there.

To make the most of online networking, keep these tips in mind:

1. Make it a habit

Good networking isn't a now-and-then activity; you need to post content online on a regular basis to experience the greatest returns.

2. Contribute useful information

Don't get complacent with things like forum participation and stay on the sidelines. Instead, share your knowledge and insights — whether it's your experience with certain software or a link to a great article.

3. Help others

It could be as simple as sending a helpful email "offline" to someone who could use your input, or posting a solution you've found to a common problem.

4. Be selective about what you share

Nothing on the Web is private so think before you post and don't write something in haste that you can't ever take back. You want to enhance your professional reputation, not harm it.

5. Be authentic

As you participate in online networking, always let your true personality shine. Your words should reflect YOU as a unique person with your own collection of talents, experience, and wisdom.

6. Don't ask for work

It's considered tacky. Besides, it makes people uncomfortable and has nothing to do with the art of networking. This is about building relationships, not making sales.

While anyone who owns a small business can participate in online networking, not everyone currently *does*. This means you may have the opportunity to gain a true competitive advantage in your market.

HOMESC.COM WINS DESIGN AWARD

The new user-friendly Home Telecom website received an Awards Certificate of Excellence from the 2011 American Graphic Design Awards. Gina Austin, Marketing Manager for Home Telecom, notes, "This is an honor, since only 15 percent of the 8,000 entries were recognized. We congratulate the website's designer, Liz Howell, Owner and Creative Director of Circumference Design Group, LLC and Lead Graphic Designer for ViaMark Advertising."



Guilty of Not Returning Calls?

Rethink your excuses—good etiquette is good for business

Have you noticed that returning phone calls is becoming a lost piece of etiquette in today's business world? Granted, we all have a lot on our plates. You may even think you have perfectly legitimate reasons for not returning calls. But think again. Failure to respond promptly—or respond at all—to phone messages could end up costing you in terms of lost sales or damage to your professional reputation.

Why don't people call back? Here are some common excuses for not returning business calls along with cautionary "food for thought" for each:

"I'm too busy."

Any given call could end up being a chance to strengthen a business relationship, learn something valuable, or reinforce your image. Given this fact, are you really too busy to return those calls? Look at it this way: Whenever you ignore a phone message, you run the risk of missing a hidden opportunity that could benefit your business. So make the time to return calls, even if it's only with very brief messages or conversations.

"If it's really a big deal, the caller will try me again. I don't need to call back."

This belief can backfire on you, particularly in time-sensitive situations. For example, if a reporter calls to get your insights about a development in your industry and you don't return that call promptly, he or she may move on to the next contact on the list in order to meet the publication deadline. By not responding to the call, you've missed your chance to get publicity for your business and enhance your reputation as an expert.

"I only return the important calls."

This strategy makes sense at first glance, but how can you know for sure which calls are important and which aren't? Say a caller simply leaves a message such as, "This is John Smith at ABC Company. Please call me at such and such phone number." What you may not realize is that John Smith was referred to you by one of your customers and is interested in doing business with you. By blowing off the call, you not only run the risk of offending the caller (a potential customer) but you could also adversely affect your relationship with the customer that made the referral.

While it can be challenging to respond to all phone messages, it's worth the effort. After all, when you don't return a call, you're communicating that the caller is unimportant to you. Is that really the message you want to send?





Sound Strategies for Email Management

When you're getting buried in emails each day, it may seem like the impossible dream to keep up with all the filing, deleting, forwarding, and responding. You know you should reply to that customer's request or that supplier's question, but you can't seem to find the time.

A good place to start is by studying what's typically found in your inbox. If there are hundreds (or thousands) of emails in your inbox right now, you could have a systems issue that needs to be addressed. **Consider the following strategies:**

- Take a closer look at your spam filter. Does it need to be upgraded or the settings changed?
- Are there newsletters you receive regularly that are no longer of value to you? Unsubscribe to them.
- Are you being copied in on communications unnecessarily? Be clear with colleagues about which projects require emails to be sent to you and which do not.
- Do you lack an effective system for processing emails or fail to designate adequate time for email management?

Your approach to dealing with each email is also vitally important. Efficiency experts generally recommend you check emails periodically, but not constantly, during the workday. Scan them quickly to determine which are most urgent/important, then read them in order of priority. The goal is to read each email once and act on it—either by replying, filing, or deleting. If you can't immediately act on a particular email, set up a to-do task and schedule a time that you are going to complete this task.

The bottom line is this: Don't let email reduce your productivity. Instead, manage it more carefully so that you have the time to effectively communicate with those people most critical to the success of your business.



RULES OF THUMB FOR TIMELY RESPONSES

In the business world, how quickly you should reply to an email or return a phone call depends on the nature of the communication. **But it's never acceptable to not respond at all to people:**

- You are doing business with
- You want to do business with
- That can refer business to you
- Who were referred

Conventional wisdom says to respond in a timely manner to emails and calls, often defined as within 24-48 hours. If you don't have an immediate answer to a question, reply to acknowledge receipt of the email or phone message and give a time frame of when you'll be able to respond completely.

What's in it for you if you get back to people promptly? It fosters a reputation of reliability, and paints you as a professional who's considerate of others. In fact, since ignoring emails and calls is now so commonplace, simply responding in a timely way can put you way ahead of your competition.

FOCUS

on the F-Factor

Fans, Friends, and Followers
influence purchasing decisions



Spread the word—consumers are increasingly turning to social media to access product information and recommendations from other consumers. Your business can take advantage of this powerful dynamic by paying attention to what trendwatching.com calls the F-Factor.

The “F” in F-Factor stands for the influence of fans, friends, and followers in today’s purchasing decisions. While buying has long involved social aspects (such as asking your neighbor if he likes his new mower), social media and related technologies have greatly amplified the importance and impact of these conversations.

Facebook is the main arena in which the F-Factor operates; three-quarters of Facebook users have “Liked” a brand, according to an Advertising Age survey in February 2011. Other F-Factor players include Twitter, smartphone apps, and Groupon. Research from trendwatching.com shows five F-Factor influences:

Discovery

Consumers discover new products and services through recommendations from friends on their social networks. Social media sites and tools help consumers discover products in a variety of ways; these include combining “Likes” from friends and creating virtual scrapbooks of products gleaned from around the Web.

Ratings

Consumers can now find personalized recommendations from friends about products they want to buy. Trendwatching.com expects targeted ratings, reviews, and recommendations to become more

popular in increasing consumer awareness of products and services.

Feedback

A survey conducted in June 2010 shows that 81 percent of consumers now go online to research purchases and part of that research entails reading reviews. Online reviews have been part of retailers’ websites for years, but buyers trust reviews more when they come from their social networks. Consumers are expected to increasingly ask their friends and followers to comment on their buying decisions.

Shopping Together

Online retailers like Amazon.com have made wish lists shareable for years. Purchasing habits are expected to become increasingly social, with the Web becoming the virtual equivalent of shopping at a mall with peers. In this sense, peers can be Facebook friends who “Like” the same band or want tickets to the same movie. This coordination of purchasing is expected to increase.

Personalization

Users of social networks can now manipulate and organize their content. Apps and Web services let users package content into personalized magazines and home pages, which can then be turned into products and services.

With the F-Factor a growing force in consumer purchases, your business really needs to be “Liked.” How can you make this happen? By providing such an exceptional customer experience and outstanding product quality that people will feel compelled to recommend your business to others.

Source: www.trendwatching.com. One of the world’s leading trend firms, trendwatching.com sends out its free, monthly *Trend Briefings* to more than 160,000 subscribers worldwide.



Overcoming Challenges at Berkeley Citizens, Inc.

Home Telecom helps BCI find cost-efficient communications solutions

Berkeley Citizens, Inc. (BCI) is a nonprofit human service organization whose goal is to provide individuals with lifelong developmental disabilities the opportunity to develop and maintain productive, self-fulfilling lifestyles. BCI is funded through the South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Trident United Way, grant programs, and donations from private companies and individuals. It manages a variety of residential options for roughly 100 people and an adult day workshop which provides life skills training to 180 adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Additionally, BCI provides service coordination to over 600 individuals living in Berkeley County and offers early intervention services to over 70 families of children with developmental disabilities.

It's imperative for BCI to make every dollar count, and Home Telecom enables us to do that."

— ALICE SHOOK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BERKELEY CITIZENS, INC.

BCI has been serving residents of Berkeley County since 1980 and has been a customer of Home Telecom since 1995, relying on us for the communications services the organization needs. Sharon Merryman, Home Telecom Business Sales Representative, has worked with BCI for the past 11 years. She notes, "BCI has a total of 140 phone lines with us for its business offices and residences in Berkeley County. In the business offices, it uses our Centrex service that provides efficient

features including three-digit dialing, call forwarding, and the ability to pick up phone lines at another desk and see whether a co-worker is on the phone. BCI also has a newly upgraded Internet plan from Home Telecom as well as TV service in the residences."

Alice Shook, Executive Director of BCI, appreciates the work Merryman has done to keep communications costs down. "She's eliminated unnecessary phone lines and equipment as well as reduced our long distance charges. As a private nonprofit organization that experiences funding cuts, it's imperative for BCI to make every dollar count, and Home Telecom enables us to do that."

Shook adds, "Home Telecom is also a local business that's very community oriented and supportive of organizations including BCI. For example, Home Telecom has generously donated to our respite program for families who need additional support in their home while caring for a family member with a disability. We're grateful for their continued interest. We are humbled and inspired by the support of Home Telecom and other local businesses and citizens of the county." More information about BCI can be found at www.BerkeleyCitizens.org.

For cost-efficient communications solutions for your business, call a Home Telecom Business Sales Representative today at 888-571-5775.

WHO'S MINDING YOUR BUSINESS?

DON WARFIELD
Installer/Repair Supervisor

As Installer/Repair Supervisor for Home Telecom on Daniel Island, Don Warfield stays active. His duties include getting orders completed on schedule, maintaining supplies, handling problems, and assisting other departments. He says, "A typical day for me includes looking over orders and making sure we have the necessary supplies and equipment we need to work them, checking and approving work reports, and working the orders through to completion."

Prior to his current position, Warfield worked for Home Telecom as an Installer/Repairman. Earlier in his career, Warfield served as an Interior Communication Electrician in the Navy, worked for AT&T for 28 years, and worked for Daniel Island Media.

Describing his favorite part of the job, Warfield says, "I like the freedom of making decisions and the ability to change things for the benefit of customers."



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Call a Home Telecom Business Sales Representative today to learn how a Metro E Circuit can benefit your company.

888-571-5775

Ask about additional services, such as MPLS, VoIP and PBX offerings.

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