Networking as a way of
gaining business for 
training consultants

Teresa Williams

During the last two years I have been involved
with investigating the subject of how training
consultants network. It has been and still is an
incredibly interesting investigation for a
number of reasons. My own training
consultancy of the last nine years has been
predominantly based on work referred
through my network of contacts. Through
this research I have come to better understand
the intuitive processes in which I have been
engaged and my feelings towards different
networking strategies. It has also been
interesting because so many times, when the
subject of my research gets raised, I am
offered all kinds of stories and anecdotes, tips
and advice, leads and research sources
without prompting. It seems to be a subject
that is close to many consultants’ hearts (and
businesses). Yet, despite importance, research
in relation to training consultancy is relatively
sparse.

My research is still in its relatively
early stages but one practical aspect has
emerged strongly. Training consultants have
a range of strategies they can choose from but
these strategies are not commonly discussed
or shared. Many of the training consultants
that I have spoken with have, in my opinion, a
very sophisticated networking approach but
they have not been really conscious of what
they have been doing. Many felt that simply
talking through their approach with me
helped them to verbalise things and refine
their approach. I feel that this is largely
because many training consultants have not
been used to analysing their networking
strategy and they are not used to discussing
their strategy with others. Many know they
should network, many make plans to network,
but the underlying strategy tends to be an
intuitive process with few overt models to
follow. When I asked why the subject of
networking was not discussed, some felt that
it was a taboo subject (for them it was a bit
like discussing money), that it was something
which should be done so discreetly that you
didn’t even talk about networking, yet for
others it was because they had never thought
to take the opportunity to discuss networking.

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Abstract

Training consultants who use networking to gain business
can consider a variety of different strategies. There may
well be a current backlash against some methods of
networking such as “working the floor” at events for
trainers. Other choices include networking with other
providers of training, networking with other providers to
form a consortium to put in bids, becoming the expert and
advertising your expertise, highly targeted networking
within a sector as well as many other strategies.
Networking is a long-term strategy based on trust,
sincerity and reciprocity of relationships.

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Teresa Williams is currently exploring the way in
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All of those who have taken part so far said that they felt enlightened and encouraged by making explicit something which before had “just happened”.

Training, especially direct delivery of courses, workshops and other live learning events, is a field that is very dependent on the person who is actually delivering it. Whilst some “products” can be developed, their success is often dependent on the effectiveness with which they are delivered. The way in which a particular trainer adapts to any trainee or group of trainees is an art in itself. This means that buyers are far less likely to proceed just on the basis of an advertisement and an interview process. In many instances, referrals, seeing the person in action at an event, and word of mouth from those you trust, play an important part in the whole process.

Whether or not this is the “correct” way to do things is not the subject of this debate. What I want to look at is the reality of what is happening and better understanding the processes involved.

Some established strategies seem to be a turn-off these days

Articles and books on best practices in networking often suggest that you should seek to give out business cards, work the floor to meet as many as possible, and “get to know” people. This may be very effective in some settings but in the world of training it seems that, in the UK at least, there is something of a backlash against this approach. One training consultant told me:

I’ve given up my membership of one of the many training related organisations that I have belonged to. This is because I wanted to go to events to enjoy them, to learn something and to relax. Instead I found that the evening meetings were being taken up with people “trying to get to know me and my needs”. These training consultants were networking in a not very subtle way, selling their services in a way that I found irritating. “No” was not an answer they wanted to hear. It has always been the case that evening meetings were an opportunity to network but now, because of the large numbers of self-employed trainers, it seems to be a focus on networking to gain business, and not networking to share ideas and learning. The balance has shifted in an unacceptable way for me.

Another example came from another gathering of trainers. We were at a day where there were trainers from all over the country and from many different companies. For a particular session we were divided fairly randomly into groups to discuss a particular topic. On introducing ourselves to each other one of the trainers who was employed by a large company groaned and said she felt cheated. She had wanted to mix with other employed trainers and not with other training consultants who might just treat her as a potential client.

Following an interview with a self-employed trainer who actually gets 95 per cent of his business through replying to advertisements and tenders I asked him whether he is happy with the way in which he gains business. He said that he would like to use networking more as he felt he was missing out potentially. Given that he had a level of business that he was satisfied with I asked how this would help him. He thought that he might be able to change the balance of the type of work he did through networking.

However, he saw networking as being more time-consuming than the current approach. I asked him if he were to do more active networking how would he set about it. His reply was that he would go along to evening meetings to try to get to know more local company trainers and to see what their needs are by attending different events for trainers. Other consultants that I spoke to who were planning to go self-employed also said that they would try to network through attending events for trainers.

So it seems that those who do not currently network and who wish to for the purposes of gaining business, have in mind the very methods which now seem to be a turn-off to the very people they are hoping to influence. So what is the alternative?

The research over the last two years has shown up some very specific types of networking strategies. Whatever you or I think of these strategies, they have proved to be very effective for some of those who have been using them. Each of these strategies comes from a training consultant who has been in business for some years and has, on the whole, gained the level of business that has suited him or her. I had also assumed that training consultants went for a variety of strategies but it seems that this is not always the case.
Networking with other providers of training

When I first came across this strategy I was amazed that it could be effective as a total approach. It involves simply networking with other training consultants in your own or closely allied fields and gaining business from them. This might take the form of doing the excess work, working in loose partnerships where your field of expertise is required, working as an associate, of following up leads which the originator is unable to do because of time pressures. This is all within ethically agreed boundaries – I’m not talking about poaching clients. You may wonder where the new work comes from. It seems that it comes from following clients when they move companies, expanding into other parts of the same company, and of course there is the fact that not every training consultant will follow this as an exclusive approach.

Networking with other providers to form a consortium to put in bids

This seems to be an approach that rears itself on a regular basis in terms of popularity. Many self-employed trainers feel that there are some contracts and companies who will not offer them work as they are too small an organisation. In an attempt to raise their image, profile and weight in the marketplace they band together. This may be done on an informal basis or through an official company formed for such purposes. My own experience and that of others who have spoken to me over the years have been mixed. The first one that I knew of was formed in recessionary years where it was hoped that by joining together they could compete with large well-known consultancies. It was a very effective forum for sharing business concerns and for giving mutual support, but people were very independent in what they wanted to do. Some limited work was done together but I suspect that this was largely due to knowing each other well rather than anything else. Some years later, one member of this group formed part of a consortium with other colleagues with the intention of going for the “big bucks”. It too seemed to die a death despite lots of enthusiasm at the start.

One consortium that I am aware of which does seem to be successful looked very carefully at their business strategy. They looked for areas of difference in each other’s expertise. Where could they gain work that would not conflict or take from the type of work which they might gain as single self-employed consultants? They felt that this type of network had a far greater chance of success. Time will tell as to whether it will be successful over many years. Advice from those who have experienced networking through consortia is to consider things very carefully and from a variety of angles, both short- and longer-term. You will be parting with some of your independence and freedom of action. Informal ground rules and legalities both need sorting out. Relying on informal agreements can lead to disappointments and the break up of working relationships with those close to you.

Becoming the expert and advertising your expertise

If you have the foresight to spot a developing subject or field you have the potential to become one of the founding experts. If you can create enough visibility and interest then clients will find you. It has been done a number of times in the training field and still seems to be a recognised and “respectable” way of doing things. One way of doing this is to focus on a clearly identified subject, be involved with the original research or with the development of the practical implications of the original research, ensure you sell the benefits to clients in a way that they can identify with (and in a way that fits with their organisational plans so that they are more inclined to part with their money), raising the profile of the subject by giving seminars, conference sessions, writing journal articles, and contributing to TV and radio programmes. If you can become associated with a leading university or business school then that might help. Be one of the first (but not necessarily the first) with high profile publications on the subject. All of this can take time, often at least two or three years. In the meantime you are likely to need some “bread and butter” work to keep you going. If you do not have the flair for spotting these new areas, you might do well to network with those who have and to be a part of their team in some way.

Highly targeted networking within a sector

Other training consultants went for a highly targeted networking strategy within a sector
that they knew well over many years. One, for example, focused on the health sector. In this sector the consultant knew all the key players in the local areas, went to the local events, dinners, product launches, supported research in the field, spoke at open days, assisted new recruits and gave careers advice. As a result when someone was needed her name came to the top of people’s lists. She certainly had plenty of fee earning work – and also plenty of non-fee earning work as a result. Those who thought of her often forgot that she was not salaried and that the extras were often done for free.

**Networking with anyone as a strategy**

Some training consultants went for a very successful strategy of networking with anyone on the basis that anyone might refer you on to a client. This involves having plenty of lunches, breakfast meetings, attending social gatherings, and virtually anything that involves you spending time with others. It seems to be particularly successful when you concentrate on the subject of the meeting or gathering and forget about the fact that you are networking.

People value you for who you are, weigh up your ethics and approach, they form opinions about your skills and knowledge, and as a result they either refer you on or not.

**Networking as a longer-term strategy**

From the research I have carried out it seems that on the whole, networking is a longer-term strategy. Trust, sincerity and reciprocity of relationships are key ingredients that have repeated themselves time and time again during the research. People usually have contact with you several times before they feel ready to refer you to others. After all, if they refer you and you do not meet expectations, it can damage their reputation as well as your own.

My research shows that those who meet with others and spend longer speaking to a few people have a greater chance of building up relationships that might result in business. In some countries and in some fields, “working the floor” to speak to as many people as you can and giving out as many business cards as you can might be effective. Training consultants have other choices, some of which might be better suited to the environment in which they are working and the current world of training.

As e-commerce and electronic networking becomes even more established it will be interesting to see the networking strategies that are effective in the years to come. As this research progresses we will be tracking the changes in the training world and how trainers network.