



BUSINESS NETWORKING CRASH COURSE

How Networking Helps Small Business Grow


 Alignable

HubSpot



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A woman with long brown hair and black-rimmed glasses is sitting at a wooden desk, looking down at a laptop. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt under a grey cardigan. A black mug is on the desk in front of her. The background is a brick wall. The image has a semi-transparent blue overlay.

Introduction

Have you ever been on a bad first date? You know the ones - awkward interactions, no chemistry, or the dreaded “too much info.” Most of us have gone through an experience like this of some kind, and the more “bad dates” we go on, the less likely we are to go on future ones.

Networking is a lot like dating. You go to events, you get introduced by friends and colleagues, you even try to connect with people online. But despite all your efforts, networking satisfaction levels are often fairly low considering how much time you invest.

If you get discouraged, which a significant number of us do, and you stop going to events, you’re less likely to ask people for introductions and before you know it you’re more isolated than ever. Sound familiar? It happens to all of us, and it’s just like dating --with all the ups and downs and awkwardness and confusion. It’s time to get the excitement back!

The good news? Your days of sub-par networking are over. There are strategies, solutions and tactics to make networking a lot easier. So let’s get started!

Networking is the lifeblood of local and small businesses. Why? Because networking is how businesses meet, connect, learn from each other, give and receive referrals, partner, co-promote and expand their reach. Networking is not just about meeting people, it is about meeting the right people - the people who can help you move your business forward.

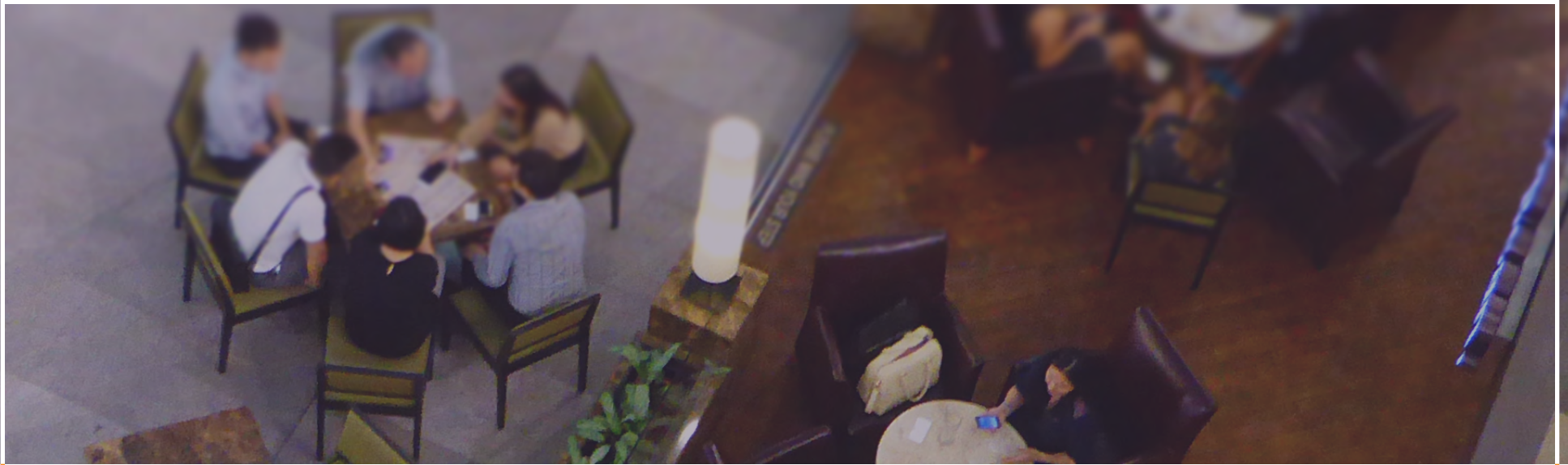
One of the most exciting aspects of networking strategically is that as you're meeting new people, you're also building a core network of trusted peers who will actually help you grow your critical reach.

The benefits of efficient networking include:

- Customer referrals
- Increased exposure through word of mouth
- Co-marketing and co-promotion opportunities
- Business advice and answers to important questions
- Access to new products and services
- Increased customer delight by referring customers to trusted peers



The State of Networking



Take Advantage of the Benefits of Networking

While this all sounds great, you're likely thinking about how you can take advantage of these benefits. The first thing to know is that traditional networking is hard, and odds are your network right now is ok at best, but in need of a revamp. You've been told to network, go to events, connect online... perhaps you've even read a [blog post or two](#), but people rarely talk about the core strategies of networking in order to truly harness its potential.

Let's say you go to a networking event for example. You walk in feeling excited and ready to conquer the world, and then within 5 minutes you feel alone, awkward and are at the bar. You're already looking

for reasons to leave and are left wondering what happened? In the event that someone does talk to you, the conversation is surface level at best and they might even try to sell you something.

Now, **reimagine that event**. You walk in feeling excited, confident, and ready to talk on the world, and then within 5 minutes...you do! That's what happens when you get strategic about your networking. It's all about knowing what to do, what to ask and say, and how to act. Much like walking into a job interview prepared, as opposed to walking in blind or inexperienced and leaving without an offer.

A person wearing a yellow beanie and a red jacket is sitting on a wooden bench in a snowy park. They are looking out over a body of water towards a city skyline, which includes the Freedom Tower. The scene is overcast and wintry.

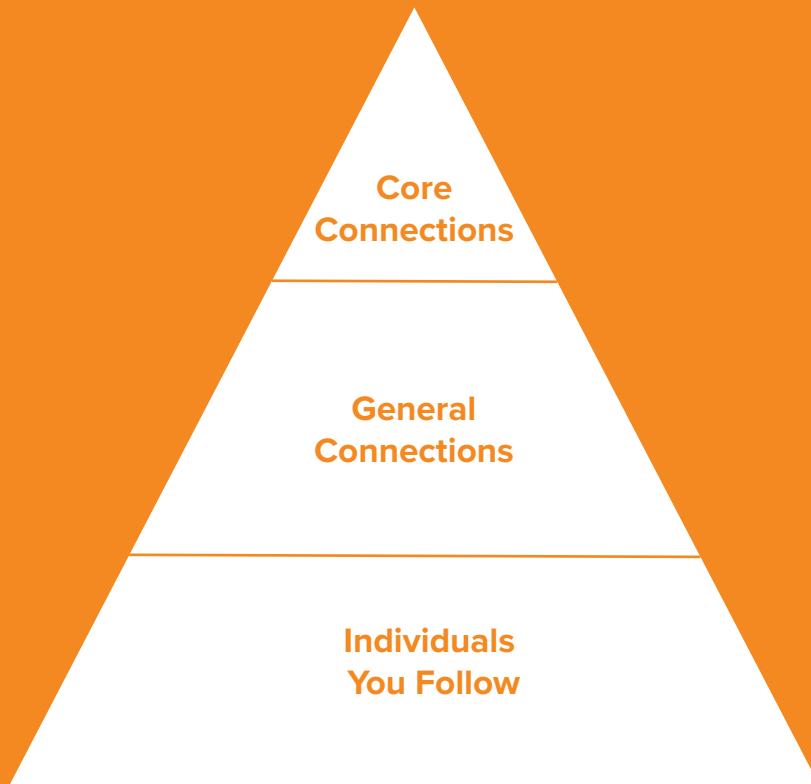
Say “No” to Isolation

Isolation is the Achilles heel of small business success, and networking is the magical cure. Many business owners have encountered and overcome some of the same challenges that you currently face; it is a fool’s errand to go it alone. You might be thinking that other business owners are too busy with their own company to want to help you out. However, the “too busy” excuse tends to be more of a defense mechanism against the untold number of solicitors trying to sell business owners the things they do not want or need. [A recent study concluded](#) that business owners feel hesitant to network with others because they feel too “salesy.”

When you sincerely engage with fellow business owners, however, they are more than willing, and often eager, to lend a hand and collaborate.

For small business owners, relationships help cultivate referrals and generate new opportunities. By avoiding isolation, you ensure that you’re connecting with fellow business owners, developing beneficial relationships that help you learn from others, strategizing fresh new ideas, and ultimately generating new customers. Think of your network as your tribe... when it comes to attracting new customers, word-of-mouth referrals are every small business’s number one source.

A helpful way to think about networking is by visualizing a pyramid - something we like to call: The Trust Pyramid. Your network is a collection of people with whom you have varying levels of trust, relationships and experience. Each type of connection that you have has a unique purpose and its own benefits.



Let's examine the different levels of The Trust Pyramid.

The Levels of Networking Connections

The Bottom of the Trust Pyramid

At the bottom of the Trust Pyramid you'll find the people you follow. These include businesses that you're aware of, would potentially like to meet, feel you can learn from, and gain insights that will help you with your business. This is the largest portion of the pyramid, because the networking process is challenging and there are a number of local businesses you haven't had the opportunity to connect with yet.





The Middle of the Trust Pyramid

In the middle of the Trust Pyramid are your general connections. These are people with whom you have a relationship and are working with to build greater trust. You look for these people at networking events and will help each other out with introductions or questions about marketing, sales or operations. These relationships have the potential to be nurtured and transformed into a core connection. Although this isn't classified in the top tier of the pyramid, general connections are valuable because you have a pre-existing relationship.

Even if you have yet to reach the point of sharing customers with this business, you can still get great insights from them, and reach out when you are

evaluating a vendor or are seeking an answer to a business problem.

For example, you might be thinking about upping your social presence and notice that one of the businesses you have a connection with has a great Facebook profile and you are wondering how they come up with such eye-catching content. Getting their advice will not only help you understand if it's worth the investment for your business, but will also allow you to start a helpful dialogue. This will increase the likelihood that they will reach out to you for advice in the future. As these types of interactions increase, trust is built, and this relationship has the potential to move to the core connection section.

The Top of the Trust Pyramid

At the top of the Trust Pyramid, you'll find your core networking connections. These are the people with whom you:

- Openly discuss your challenges
- Share information
- Regularly refer each other customers

This is the smallest group in your network because these relationships are the hardest to develop. As a business owner, you need to fully trust a business if you are going to associate yourself with them and recommend them to your valued customers and/or connections and generate customers together. However, once you're able to get a few of these core connections, you will see how valuable they are to your business. Not only will you gain new revenue opportunities from these referrals, but

you'll also be able to delight your own customers by sending them to a business that has your same level of customer service and satisfaction.

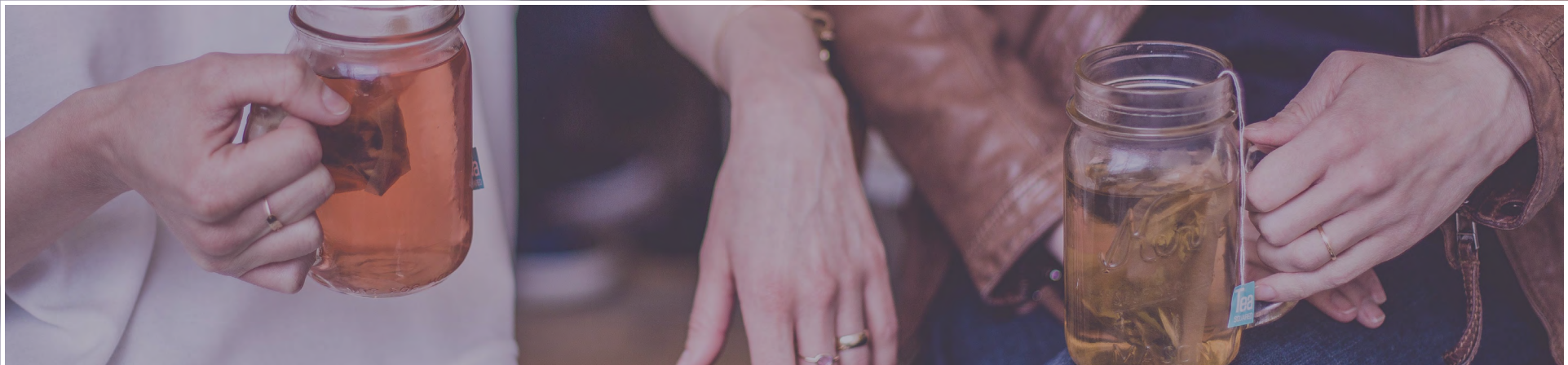
For example, if you own a company that sells and installs blinds, and are able to refer your customers to a stellar painter or home remodeling pro, then you're providing them value well beyond their bedroom shades. They will trust your business even more because of the professionals you send them to, and will be more than willing to recommend your business to their friends and family. Your word of mouth has now increased twofold because not only will the business you referred customers to send their customers to you, but your clients will be so pleased with the exceptional service and advice that you provided, that they will also refer your business.





Building, Engaging, and Maintaining Your Network

Now that you've seen the benefits of networking, are avoiding isolation, and have an understanding of connection levels, let's talk about how to build, engage and maintain your network!



Focus on Them

Whenever you make a new connection be sure to focus your attention on learning as much as you can about the other person and their business. This is not the time to pitch your business, but rather, to figure out what you share in common with each other. If you begin the conversation with a pitch, they will immediately be turned off (wouldn't you be?) and will likely find a way to end the conversation as quickly as possible.

Think of networking like going on a date. If you show up and only talk about yourself, the date will probably end in one of two scenarios: They will either go to the bathroom and never come back, or, they will stick it out, and never contact you again. The problem with both of these outcomes, aside from ruining your chances with them, is that if any of the people they know mention you, they will give you a less than stellar recommendation.

The same scenario can be applied to networking. If you start out as self-absorbed, unhelpful, and salesy, the fellow business owner will not waste their time talking to you. If someone mentions you or your business at a later date, you can bet they will not be sending them your way.

You want to make a great first impression, so that they are more likely to meet you a second time, and eventually, introduce you to their friends and family (or mom and dad, depending on what analogy you want to go with here).

Find Common Ground

Once you find areas of common interest (you may already be supporting the same non-profits for one) set up a time to get together for coffee to continue the discussion. Discuss other similarities your businesses may have. The conversation will naturally flow to the customers you sell to, which can be similar if you've done your homework and identified the business as targeting a similar customer target base. Inquire how they go about marketing to their target demographic, ask how they get new leads, or their most successful way of acquiring new sales. Be honest about your struggles and successes, they will appreciate your honesty just as you appreciate theirs.

As you discuss your common target customers, ask if they are interested in digging in deeper, or potential [co-marketing](#) or promotional opportunities. Come up with a plan to connect again, either online or offline, to work through these potential opportunities.





Set a Goal

Set your sights on meeting at least one new business owner connection each month (or more!). In order to grow your network you need to meet new people, and be disciplined in your efforts. We've all heard the expression "don't put all of your eggs in one basket" and this expression holds his holds true in networking. You might have one awesome relationship, in which you get great advice and new customers but you shouldn't only count on that one relationship. What happens if they retire? Or sell their business? You need to have a few strong core connections, increasing your likelihood of referrals and growing your customer base. The more referrals you get, the more customers you have to impress, and the more they will talk about and recommend your business. This type of word of mouth will help sustain and grow your business.

Share, Share, Share

The power of your network lies both in the connections made and the information shared. Not surprisingly, when you break down word-of-mouth referrals, a similar pattern arises: words (information shared) and mouths (connections made). So engaging with your network is all about sharing interesting information with your connections on a regular basis so they know what you are up to or are looking for so they can lend a hand.





Engage Your Core

Whether you're looking for answers, trying to find part-time help, or wanting to get the word out about an upcoming event, your core group of connections is your most valuable resource. Interacting with these connections on a daily or weekly basis is the norm.

Interaction with your core can come in many forms, you can share a promotion of theirs on Facebook, drop by their office to say hello, write an email, send a text, or make a quick phone call. Don't pester them by contacting them everyday, but regular check-ins are encouraged and help build trust and awareness. Not every interaction has to be about referrals either. You might email someone in your core network to let them know about an awesome trick you learned for advertising on Facebook, to ask their advice on a pressing business issue you are currently facing, or to tell them you referred them a customer who should be coming in to make a purchase sometime next week. These types of regular, helpful, non-salesy conversations will help core connections flourish.

There are a number of places to look online to grow your network. While each of the following options has its own benefits and value, it doesn't hurt to consider each to get your creative juices flowing!

Alignable: For small and local businesses. Alignable is how business owners network, increase word of mouth marketing and generate referrals.

Eventbrite: Head here and type in “networking event” and designate your city or town. Here you'll see a wide array of events going on in your area that could be of interest to you.

Facebook: Most business owners these days have a Facebook business page. You can discover businesses in your area and find their contact information, but we don't recommend posting directly to their page, as Facebook pages are primarily for consumer purposes.

Meetup: This website gets people together to learn something, do something or share something. If you have interests related to your business, this is a way to get in touch with more people in your area. For instance, if you own a store or bar that specializes in high end Whiskey, there's sure to be a Whiskey meetup group in your area.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen shows a website with the text 'OFF FESTIVAL' and a logo featuring a crossed hammer and pickaxe. The person is wearing a dark leather watch on their left wrist. The background is blurred, showing other people's hands and arms, suggesting a social or networking event.

Places to Grow Your Network

LinkedIn: We know what you're thinking, LinkedIn is nothing but spam and posts that don't belong on LinkedIn. The good news though, is that there are over 300 million members on LinkedIn, so you can find people you're looking for with a little work. While direct messaging might not be the most popular way to introduce yourself to people these days, you can always start by connecting, liking content that they produce, or share their posts to get some attention. Then, once you've interacted a bit and have shown you support them, they might be more willing to read your direct message.

Niche communities: Sometimes you want to network with people for one reason, Marketing for instance. Communities like inbound.org or Growthhackers are great places for you to connect with people who clearly share your same interests.

Pinterest: Branded as “The World’s Catalog of Ideas,” Pinterest can be an interesting place for you to find businesses who share your interests, especially if you have a visually captivating business like food or furniture building.

Twitter: I'm sure you're wondering how one is supposed to grow their network using 140-character tweets. Although it seems like a stretch, Twitter is a great way to connect with business owners. Use Twitter's search function to find business owners that share the same customer base as you and reach out to them.





The Networking Funnel

Now that you see all of these wonderful networking opportunities, you're probably wondering what real business value will come from your efforts. The reason that most people network is to gain value for either their personal brand or business. In addition, there's tremendous value and a sense of meaning with simply knowing more people in your community and helping them reach their goals.

The process of interacting with people and expanding your reach via networking is what we call "**Connection Marketing**" and here's what the funnel looks like:

Networking - By networking with other business owners in your town, you are exposing your brand to the most amount of people possible. Although not every person in this section of the funnel will be a qualified connection, they'll help you spread the word. Think about this in the same way you engage with inbound marketing, producing content. The more people get to know you, and trust you, the more likely they are to recommend your business to a customer, family member, or friend looking for your service.

Word of Mouth Marketing – Now that you have a top of the funnel segment of general people you network with, you can further extract value. By being active in your community and helping people in your network, you can increase your word of mouth marketing.



You can make introductions for people or answer questions to showcase your expertise on an online Q+A forum (Inbound.org or Alignable are both great examples), but whatever you do, think about what you can do to provide opportunities for the people in your network, that's what will really get people talking about you. The more you give the more you get.

Referrals – As you continue to network and increase your word of mouth marketing, referrals will follow. Since your business will be more top of mind in a helpful way (not just because you blast out Tweets and Facebook updates), people will be more inclined to trust you. As your network grows and improves in value, you'll be able to more easily generate referrals, which can include: Customer referrals, co-promotions/partner opportunities, information exchanges or any other type of value added connection. In addition, you'll find the more people you meet along the way, that some of them will inevitably wind up being a customer or client of yours.

The best part about this funnel is that it is never ending. There will always be new business to be had, starting with networking and word of mouth. For most local businesses, word-of-mouth marketing is a critical part of their business, and coincides perfectly with an active inbound marketing strategy. In order to increase your word-of-mouth marketing, you need to please the customers you already have so they refer you to their friends and family, and build a strong core network with fellow local businesses who have similar customers and struggles. Not only will you gain customers through their member base, but you'll also learn new ways to market through those connections.

For example, let's say you and another business in your network have always put coupons in the local circular. You can share referrals with that connection by talking about each other's businesses to those customers who come in through the advertisement. That is one way to increase word-of-mouth.

Now imagine another business in your network doesn't use coupons in a circular, but rather, uses targeted Facebook advertisements to generate new business. Not only can you work with them to make sure any of their customers who come in off of the Facebook ads are told about your business, but you can also ask them for advice for creating paid Facebook ads of your own. Your partnership with this business will lead to an increased amount of word-of-mouth because, not only are they referring their customers to you, but they are also teaching you a new way of effectively advertising to your target marketing, creating an even larger amount brand recognition and awareness.



The only way that networking will work for you is if you strategize and set goals.

The why – Why do you want to network? Are you looking to increase your customer base, learn about Facebook marketing or blogging from a fellow business owner, looking for a co-promotion...etc? Write down your top 3 goals of networking before you start, and each time you begin and end a networking session, compare your results against your goals to ensure you're spending your time wisely.

The who – Think about who you want to network with...is it people in your industry? Perhaps you're a baker and want to connect with other bakers to spark new ideas. Or perhaps you want to meet people who share your same customer base, or people who need what it is that your business offers. You could also be looking to connect with people and business owners in your community, but whatever the reason just make sure you define the segment.

Customize Networking for You



The what – Once you’ve established why you want to network and who you want to network with, practice your “ask” until you have it down to a science. People respond best to concise and targeted “asks” so if you’re going to take the time to research who you want to meet and possibly attend an event, make sure you know exactly what you’re going to say. Put yourself in the best position to win as well. If you’re going to a networking event, research the guest list beforehand so you know who will be there. Identify the people you want to meet, research their background a bit and then seek them out. That way, you’ll never waste time at a networking event again.

The where – You have options, both on and offline. Keep in mind though that the way you network with people should be tailored. For instance, the way you interact with businesses on Twitter will differ from the way you interact on Alignable, or Facebook.

The when – Don’t wait for networking to come to you, go out and get it.

The only path out of isolation is to open yourself up to opportunities to meet others. As a small and/or local business owner, people want to hear from and interact with you. Each time you interact with fellow business owners or attend a networking event you have the opportunity to make a new connection. Here's our theory on what holds people back from doing this more often:

The average business owner receives 7 unsolicited sales pitches per week. Each one typically starting off with "Are you the business owner?" or "Is the business owner available?" It drives business owners nuts and the last thing you want is to be the one with those words coming out of your mouth.

If this is what haunts you... it's time to get over it. It's perfectly normal to start slow, just start somewhere and give the process sincere time, effort and energy. You'll be amazed at what this [Connection Marketing](#) and Networking (free by the way!) can do for you.



Conclusion: Don't Hesitate

It's Time to Build Your SMB Network on Alignable

It's Easy to Get Started

- Create a free account
- Connect with business owners you already know
- Reach out to others you'd like to work with
- Recommend those you're willing to refer others to
- Share what you're up to, join local discussions, meet your neighbors, and help each other succeed.

Join Now -- It's Free



Connect with the people that matter on social media

HubSpot makes it easy.

- HubSpot Social Inbox shows you the entire history of interactions with your contacts
- Schedule your social media posts
- Integrate your social media accounts with your CRM
- See how social media helps drive leads and customers for your company

Try HubSpot Now

