

The Business of Christmas!

From now on, it is impossible to forget that Christmas is coming. Shopping Centres become busier; most homes will be decorated with Christmas trees, coloured lights and decorations in celebration of this time of year.

But, for a business owner, Christmas and the opportunities that arise at this time of year should mean much, much more.

We all know Christmas is fun, but have you ever thought of using it as an opportunity to improve your business and its many relationships? Well, since it's the season for it, perhaps there are some opportunities, that you may like to consider; if you haven't done so already.

Have you ever thought about attending other companies Christmas functions (if you're invited of course)? This can be a wonderful chance to network, especially if your business is compatible with the host companies demographic (as in, you have something they may want to use). Or there might be an opening to make a strategic alliance in the New Year, if this is your goal, make sure you spend plenty of time, at the function, with the key decision makers.

Christmas can also be the best time of year to launch your networking career! So take advantage of the 'Christmas Spirit' and invitations to introduce yourself to lots of potential clients, in particular those that may normally be harder to get to. I wouldn't recommend these functions are the time to launch into sales pitches, infact I'd advise against that. All you need to do is take along a good supply of business cards and hand them out. However, make sure for every card you hand out, you get one in return and that way you can follow them up after Christmas. Another thing to remember, and one of the last things you want to do in this environment is be overly enthusiastic; relax, be yourself and the contacts should come easily. It is Christmas after all.

Here are some other tips for networking at Christmas:

- Always know your focus – the reason you are networking
- Listen and ask questions
- Give referrals – have a “givers gain” philosophy. The most successful businesses grow from referrals and the best way to get them is to give them
- Don't try to close any deals – networking is about building relationships

- Write notes – in particular on the back of business cards you collect, this may help jog your memory when you chase them up, after Christmas
- Follow up and keep any promises you make

Another business opportunity you may like to consider this Christmas is the acknowledgement of your current relationships with existing clients and staff. You already have them, no doubt you want to keep them and there are many ways you can thank them. If you believe in the law of reciprocity, and your business is the least bit successful, you must know that giving back is not only the right thing to do, its smart business as well. The most difficult part of this process is to decide what to give, to thank clients and staff for all the loyalty they have shown in the past year. With this in mind, try to come up with something unique, that stands out above the rest and reflects the nature of the relationship you have. If you can, try and make it as personal as possible, something that mirrors the interests and likes of recipient. You might have clients you play golf with on a regular basis, how about a small box of Christmas themed golf balls. Or what about your staff who may simply love going to the movies, you could shout them a night at one of those Gold Class Cinemas. However, if moving down this road, make sure you're mindful of religious beliefs and differences, as you don't want to offend in that area either.

Start thinking about what to give as soon as possible. You might need to dedicate at least one person to work on this solely, dependant on the size of your business. Given enough time and resources, this can be done quickly and efficiently. With the click of a mouse you can find so many more choices, while saving more time than you could with weeks of prospecting on foot. The internet and a smart strategy can make this a profitable (in the long term) and enjoyable task!

Lastly, and of most importance is your internal Christmas celebration. One rule when hosting a company Christmas party, and if you want staff to show up, is that you don't hold it at the office. Employees are more than likely tired, and more than ready for a workplace break, so it may be difficult to entice them back into the office. Make it an event they will want to attend. It's a busy time of year and your company Christmas party faces a lot of competition, with other events. The key here is to make your function something more desirable, which might mean breaking the mould and changing what you do from year to year. You might decide that the traditional sit around somewhere and eat party is now a non-event and opt for something like a picnic in the park. This may allow for the families of your employees to also attend – who knows you might even put your hand up to take on the role of Father Christmas!

As an employer you also have an obligation to ensure the safety and welfare of your employees at work. This obligation also extends to Christmas functions, regardless of whether it will be held on work premises. While the festive season is short lived, it is a timely reminder to ensure the health and safety of staff at all workplace functions. Below are some tips that might be of help:

- Serve alcohol responsibly
- Provide food and non alcoholic drinks
- Choose a safe venue, somewhere with access to public transport and taxi's if required

Christmas parties are great! They help foster morale, build teams and are an excellent way to reward staff. This is also a great opportunity for employees to get to know each other and you might also get to know them. They are a wonderful way to thank your employees for all their hard and diligent work throughout the year. And while it won't contribute directly to sales or your bottom line, a happy, contented and appreciated team will always outsell an unhappy, restless and unappreciated one.

You may or may not have your Christmas Campaign underway, but in wrapping up (pardon the pun), if you focus on networking, give back to those who have given to you this past year and reward through celebrations, there is no doubt the "Business of Christmas" will prepare you to prosper in the new year ahead. But before that happens, have yourself a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year !