

# SALES AND MARKETING

## Do you have a treasure trove of customer relationships?

BY MICHELLE DAMICO

When times are tough, knowing your customer can be your most treasured business asset. With belt-tightening the norm for businesses, that's the message from CEOs, entrepreneurs and solopreneurs in the suburbs and Chicago who offered examples of how knowing their customers helped them survive and thrive.

"In the environmental engineering business, it's relationship-driven; we don't have long-term contracts, but we do have long-term clients," said Bob Platt, CEO of Elmhurst-based Mostardi Platt, an environmental testing and consulting firm. Commercial and industrial businesses rely on Mostardi Platt to stay abreast of clean-air and water regulations or to design systems to comply with or audit compliance of environmental protections.

Platt says his business is primarily project-based, and as a result, his project managers have developed strong customer relationships over the years.

"Our mantra is if you think you haven't talked to a client recently, than give them a call. We know they're busy and don't want to seem like we're bugging them. Typically, we help them stay on top of regulatory changes facing their industries and that's how we earn their trust and confidence," Platt said.

Most clients lack deep knowledge of environmental regulations, and that's where the trust plays a big role. "We're like the surgeon treating the patient who lacks the training to find their own cure. Our customers trust that we'll come up with the best possible compliance options without undue cost. That trust is the result of relationship building over time," said Platt.

Building trust over time is a concept that applies to the not-for-profit world as well. In fact, "trust" is part of the name of the 40-year old Trust for Public Land, which relies on donors to achieve its mission of conserving land for people to enjoy as parks,

gardens and other natural places. The Trust for Public Land played an instrumental role in helping earn federal authorization of the area's first National Wildlife Refuge, The Hackmatack, stretching from northeastern Illinois into Wisconsin and within a 100-mile drive for Chicago- and Milwaukee-area residents.

Beth White, director of The Trust for Public Land Chicago region office, says securing federal conservation protections for Hackmatack involved six years of relationship building with community and conservation groups such as Friends of Hackmatack, Open Lands and Sierra Club, as well as elected officials, governments and donors.

"Donors give to The Trust for Public Land because they have an affinity for what we do and because we get high marks for accountability and for being among the most efficient charities in the U.S. Our donors often have personal interest and expertise related to our projects and become key partners, often for decades," said White.

For more than two decades, Ambrosia Euro-American Patisserie in Barrington has served customers' culinary tastes and curiosities in Lake, Kane and McHenry Counties and beyond. Deborah and Richard Rivera, 23-year owners of Ambrosia say regulars who visit weekly comprise 40 to 50 percent of their daily customer count.

"We know nearly half of our customers by name, so over the years they've become our de facto advisory board," says Debby Rivera. "More than ever, we are listening to what they want — superior bakery items and beverages made with natural, high quality ingredients, served in a comfortable and welcoming cafe setting."

Rivera says the recession has changed customers' family and work lives. "Many have lost or left their jobs and work out of their homes, where they feel more isolated. They come here for a croissant and conversation."

So when local acoustic, jazz and classical



Deborah Rivera, co-owner of Ambrosia Euro American Patisserie in Barrington, says her regular customers "become our de facto advisory board."

musicians pitched the idea of live performances at Ambrosia, the Riveras redesigned their cafe floor plan for concerts, presented at least twice each month.

"Our marketing approach has been tailored to what our customers need," says Rivera. "They are much more stressed out and we try to be in tune to what they're looking for. I think that's a critical component that's kept us going during the recession," she added.

Deep relationships are what drive solopreneurs as well. Ask Catherine Morgan, transition and entrepreneur coach at Point A to Point B Transitions, Inc. She says 80 percent of leads come from client referrals.

"Building strong relationships is the best possible

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## How smart companies are getting even smarter

Every company has a brain trust. Is your company tapping it wisely to empower your people?

While most executives agree that professionals require proper and ongoing education to excel, it is easy to understand why training, in general, is often ignored or minimally engaged. A sampling of excuses follows: everyone is busy, it's time-consuming to prepare materials, it's expensive, we can't get everyone together, we can't afford to hire a reputable expert.

Amid these obstacles to a more knowledgeable workforce is the fear of risking something — time, money and other resources. On the other side of that fear, however, is an often overlooked solution called knowledge sharing.

This simple concept is becoming increasingly more important for companies who seek to work smarter and equip their employees with a better

toolbox to sell, produce and innovate.

Knowledge sharing utilizes the intellectual capital of your existing staff. These are the people who already walk your halls, frequent your conference rooms, talk to customers, and problem-solve critical issues. They are experts who can help educate fellow employees by sharing their knowledge on a periodic basis. Think sports. Accomplished athletes could never adopt a "no train, no gain" policy. Truly competitive companies are no different.

For example, our department heads at Kelmscott Communications are encouraged to prepare a PowerPoint



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and present information at monthly sales meetings. Recently, the director of the Wide Format Department helped our sales team understand his group's process, defined objectives common to wide format projects, shared best practices relative to various substrates, and talked about his team's strengths. Knowledge sharing produced a more confident, better informed sales force. It's really true: knowledge is power.

Simply put, companies are leaving things on the table if they don't share information in a structured environment.

Knowledge sharing brings forth the art of conversation in a digitally networked world where people sometimes feel isolated or limited in reaching out to others. Encapsulating intellectual property has helped our company drive sales and retain our best people. It has helped us shape a more effective sales force.

Another rich source for intellectual capital are business partners and vendors. An event in the form of a "lunch and learn" featuring a key supplier provides tremendous insight, from consumer trends to technical data. Inviting vendors to share their expertise creates stronger relationships with them, too, and helps your organization stay competitive.

Not sure what subjects to share? Survey employees to identify areas they feel would be beneficial. Investing in training, especially knowledge sharing, offers significant payback.

Don't ignore your company's greatest assets — the knowledge your employees bring through the door every day. Just start sharing.

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## Customer: Testimonials on website can help, too

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thing I can do for my business," said Morgan. "I don't think people actively search for my services. More likely, a colleague or friend will recognize that help is needed and make a referral suggestion. So it's just as important to maintain relationships with past clients and have a good keep-in-touch strategy."

Morgan says another benefit of great client relationships is getting testimonials on her website and social

network pages. "Business decisions are based on social proof — so if someone is evaluating my service, I want them to find great client success stories to help close the deal. Google and LinkedIn are the new background checks," she added.

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Beth White, right, director of The Trust for Public Land Chicago region office, said it took six years of relationship building on several levels to secure federal conservation protections for The Hackmatack in northeastern Illinois. She was joined by Sen. Dick Durbin and other officials at the wildlife refuge's dedication.

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