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# Changing the conversation:

The accountant's guide to winning more referrals

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# Introduction

**As the world of communication changes, accountants need to be savvy to ensure new business keeps rolling in.**

2016 saw the rise of referral marketing within accountancy practices, and it continues to surge in 2017. Keeping your employees and clients happy is just the beginning!

This guide will show you how building the right network can turn your practice into a referral-churning machine. We'll help you:

- Identify key employees and how they can become natural referrers
- Enhance your client relationships to increase referrals
- Identify and initiate lucrative business partners

Plus, exclusive tips on how to build an active referral model from an industry expert with decades of success.



# Employee advocacy

**You don't have to look far for advocacy resources. Who knows the "why" of your practice better than the people who work there?**

Your employees are perceived as authentic and trustworthy by their family and friends, making them a valuable referral resource for your practice. To activate this stream and get your employees talking, you need to create an exceptionally favorable work experience that your employees take pride in. The best way to do this is to establish a company culture.

Your company's culture is its personality. It's the visions, values, habits and language that makes your company come to life. Company culture is a big factor in your employees' decision to work for you – in some instances more important than salary and benefits. In 2016, the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) released a study showing that 44% of employees find overall company culture to be a very important aspect of job satisfaction.

## How to improve your company culture

Because there are so many factors to company culture, it's an extensive thing to measure and track. However, there are a few things you can quickly implement to delight your employees and strengthen their relationship with the company:

- **Define your company's mission and get employee buy-in.** Your mission statement isn't just a lengthy paragraph. It's why your practice exists and how you go about bringing your services to your customers. To get employee buy-in, you need define your employees' roles in the mission and how important they are to the company's success.

- **Make recognition a habit.** The SHRM study showed that 48% of employees say management recognition of job performance is an important aspect of job satisfaction. Your employees dedicate a large portion of their time to your practice and they need to feel their contributions are valued. A little recognition goes a long way – dedicate a few minutes during company meetings to acknowledge successes, exceptional dedication and outstanding work. You could also establish an employee of the month program that includes a small award.
- **Make it fun!** All work and no play is the recipe for employee burn out. Company events, outings, volunteer initiatives and festive holiday celebrations give your employees a chance to interact with each other as a camaraderie. Allowing your employees this kind of time shows that you value them as individuals, not just as a work force.

## Create an employee referral program

Another quick way to get your employees referring your practice is to incentivize them for each referred customer. A monetary incentive is an obvious motivator, but if your budget doesn't allow for that, a small prize or reward could also get your employees talking. Build a system for tracking referrals internally – perhaps an online form or a space on your client intake form for new customers to indicate how they heard of your firm.

# How to choose the right business partners and monetize your relationships

**A common example of influencer advocacy is partnering with other businesses to have them refer their customers to your clients.**

It's a model that Chris Godden, owner and director of Blenheim Chartered Accountants and Business Advisers has implemented successfully for more than 10 years – so much so that it's the biggest driver of new business for his practice.

## How does he do it?

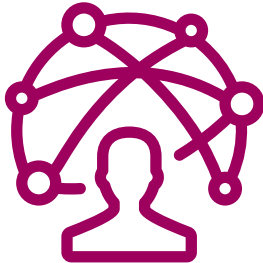
By being strategic in choosing his business partners. Godden has been part of a team of complementary business owners for roughly 10 years. His business group includes a lawyer, a recruiter and an Independent Financial Advisor (IFA).

*“We’re a very close group. We’re more like friends at this point. And because we are looking for similar client types, it’s quite seamless for us to refer business to each other’s practices. We are very in tune with each other’s business needs and share mutual clients,” Godden explained.*



**Godden shared a few of his tried-and-true tips for selecting business partners and turning those relationships into a steady stream of clients.**

**Keep connected**



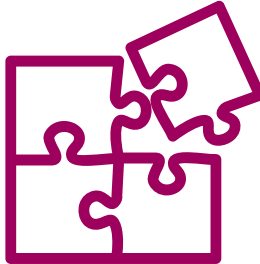
My group and I get together once a month to talk through business challenges that we have. It's great because the other partners can offer insight and make suggestions on things I may not have thought about. The more time you spend communicating with your partners, the more you will be able to exchange details to earn business for each other.

**Be a good business partner**



If I pick up a new client, quite often I'm looking at how I can direct that client to the other partners. It's an easy transition. Most small businesses need a lawyer or will complain about being short-staffed. Because I'm in tune with my partners, I know exactly what to say to get them connected. That way you earn the trust of your business partners, and you become a trusted advisor for your client.

**Look for similar business values**



I happened to meet my group by chance, but I could tell it was a good fit almost immediately. I'm happy to refer my partners without even having a meeting with them because I trust them. I know they're not in it to line their own pockets. There must be mutual respect, trust and ethics for it to work.

**Create a multi-disciplinary practice**



Because my group is so closely aligned and our businesses are complementary, we often host events for small business owners in which we cover every aspect of their business that we can service. We are three separate services, but to the client it feels like a coordinated effort.

# Client advocacy

**Once you've delighted clients with your exceptional service, ask them to return the favor by sharing a testimonial on their social networking sites. When properly motivated, this group essentially becomes a collection of brand advocates, helping to increase sales without spending anything. In some cases, you could even reduce costs.**

Goddard said asking a client for a referral should be seamless if the client is satisfied with your service.

*"It's a fairly easy question if you are on good terms with the client. All we do is ask them if they know of any other businesses that they work with that could benefit from working with us. This usually leads to a warm lead," he said. "Once you become a trusted partner, it becomes easier to convert opportunities into clients."*

You might want to look at building a client referral program. One sector this is particularly successful in, is recruitment. Most recruiters offer a referral fee if anyone refers a lead and pays out if that lead is successfully placed in a role.

Mr Williamson of Six Degrees Legal Recruitment said:

*"It's something I've been offering from the very beginning and easily accounts for 30% of my leads. Once I'm in touch with someone I simply ask them if they know of anyone else – easy - but they will forget if there's no incentive, so I offer a fee, it's quite a big fee but it's a no brainer if it turns into a deal. Also it's free and is a great way to build a healthy pipeline. It was slow at the start but once you've shown you're reputable the leads just keep on coming"*

With such a simple model this could easily be translated over to the accountancy profession.

# Spend more time doing what you love

Your clients deserve your attention. By padding your referral model and creating a healthy stream of warm leads, you spend less time chasing new business and more time tending to your clients and building your firm's clout. The right conversations with the right advocates for your firm will put you in the best position.

## Key takeaways for starting your referral model:

1

**Identify who in your practice could be the perfect employees to work on a referral program with you.**

Get them involved and build the program together - there's no better input than from employees themselves.

2

**Also identify employees who are active on social media and can help extend your reach on platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter.**

This can start out free and if you want to add small budgets to drive more activity you can.

3

**Are there any business in your community that would make a productive referral partner?**

Identify the top 10 and start with a friendly approach to talk about the idea - it might be good to have some of your clients lined up as examples of those you can already refer to them. This way they will see the partnership is genuine and there's something in it for them from the start.

4

**Have you delighted your clients enough for them to refer new business to you?**

How can you motivate or incentivize happy clients to send you their friends, family members and associate over competitors? How can you add more value to your client relationships to increase client satisfaction?





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