

Tuffin' It Out

An article series to help you survive and thrive in these times

By Jessica Tobacman

Networking Within Your Profession and Then Some

This rough economy calls for action. When the phone stopped ringing near the end of last year, architect Jim Pitzen decided to generate leads by reaching out to old and new contacts.

"Business is all referral-based," explains Pitzen, of NARI Member Pitzen Design Ltd., in Brookfield, Wis. To increase the number of referrals he receives, Pitzen decided to contact those who have referred him in the past.

One of the methods Pitzen uses to reacquaint himself with colleagues and clients is to mail them thank you letters annually, after the winter holidays. He times it to avoid competing with the cards people receive during the holidays and to help ensure that recipients notice them. The letters say that Pitzen appreciates the work others have passed his way and also mention his NARI chapter and any upcoming events.

Pitzen prioritizes the order in which he writes the letters. First, he sends thank you notes to anyone who has referred him in the previous year, including subcontractors, suppliers and homeowners, but mainly to home improvement contractors because they are the professionals who refer him the most. The majority of these individuals are NARI members.

Then, Pitzen sends notes reintroducing himself to contractors he has worked with during his 10 years as a NARI member. Third, Pitzen sends letters to NARI members listed in his chapter directory. These are mostly general contactors with which he has not previously worked.

And, finally, Pitzen sends individual notes to new NARI members, welcoming them to the association and describing some of the advantages of being involved with it. This is a way for Pitzen to introduce himself and to build relationships.

Sending these mailings is a way to keep your name top of mind. This way they are more likely to think of—and to refer—you when someone they know is looking for a professional in your line of work.

"[Outreach efforts] seem to be working out so that's a good thing. There's not a lot of work out there, but there is work out there," Pitzen says. He has already received one job from a letter he sent out. It seems like more work may be coming, too, from the many times Pitzen has heard from remodelers thanking him for the letters. They tell him they are glad to be in contact. "There's a lot of activity, with the phone ringing and contractors touching base about upcoming projects."

Other NARI members could apply Pitzen's method of contacting current and previous clients to their businesses as a means of connecting with other professionals. First, focus on communicating with the people who have given out your name previously. If you're a remodeling contractor, not a subcontractor, you would want to send letters to your most recent homeowner clients.

"It's about generating work. ... I'm seeing a lot of NARI members contacting past clients, homeowners. That's their bread and butter," Pitzen said.

"It's all about networking and staying current," Pitzen says. "You have to continually tell people what you do, even past clients. With remodelers, bring [work] up and repeat what you do." This way, others will think to pass your name on to other clients.

When other contractors recommend him to customers, Pitzen thanks them by, if possible, giving their names out to potential clients. He always calls remodelers to thank them for referrals. "The greatest thing you can do for someone is to give out their name, to refer them. That's the beauty of networking."

If the person who refers Pitzen is in a line of business he doesn't have a lot of call to send them business, Pitzen will think of another way to thank him or her. For example, the agent through which Pitzen has liability insurance often refers clients to him; however, Pitzen rarely comes across individuals looking for this type of insurance. So, instead of a referral, he thanked the agent with tickets to a Milwaukee Bucks basketball game.

In general, Pitzen tries to refer back. NARI offers many possibilities for networking within a trustworthy group of individuals. "I give out a name and know that the person will do the work. ... The best thank you is to get them work, or send them a client; to return the favor."

When The Going Gets Tough....

The Tough [AKA NARI Members] Get Going