

**A**s a small business owner in a tough economy, you have probably found yourself in plenty of situations in which you have wondered what others facing similar dilemmas have done to succeed.

By Stephanie Harris

# Building Your Network

Why every water dealer should be doing it

Perhaps it is a tricky contaminant problem, a complicated installation or the rigors of selling in a down market—regardless of the issue, it helps to confer with others who are experiencing the same.

For small businesses, networking can provide a lifeline of business support. By sharing information, ideas and solutions with other water dealers, you will improve your business performance and develop your knowledge and skills.

“Dealers need to network and need to know other dealers,” said Bret Tangle, owner of Sterling Water, Inc. And one of the best ways to begin a professional network, according to Tangle, is by attending industry events such as national and regional association conferences. “Dealers should be attending regional shows to meet people they can trust, because there are issues that are going to come up,” he said.

Just last year, for example, water dealers in California were faced with a legislative threat that would have banned the use of water softeners in residences. Water dealers and industry groups worked together to combat the issue, however, the industry will continue to see similar legislation as time goes on. By talking with peers who have prior experience with such situations, dealers will be better prepared to fight issues presented before them.

“As a dealer, you need to talk to your competitors because you are a member of a larger group,” Tangle said.

Industry tradeshows, such as Water Quality Association (WQA) events, are ideal ways to network with fellow water dealers. With its intimate environment, regional events in particular provide optimal networking opportunities.

“Networking with other dealers

will give [dealers] an idea about their strengths or their weaknesses when compared with peers in the business,” said Cindy Gresham, executive director of the Florida WQA (FWQA). “In a short period of time, one will be able to compare their own business skills and knowledge with others around them. If they are lacking, certainly the tools to build those skills will be available.”

The FWQA holds its annual tradeshow in early June of each year, and like many other regions events, provides ample networking opportunities for attendees. “As with most regional tradeshows, the FWQA is a small group, much less intimidating to the local dealer when compared with the national tradeshow,” Gresham said. “This venue allows the local dealer access to their OEM, and some major manufacturer reps, in a comfortable, one-on-one situation.”

## Forming Groups

By attending industry events and networking with fellow dealers, you are sure to develop friendships along the way. These relationships are ideal for forming 20 Groups with other dealers—a concept that is practiced in many industries.

With the assistance of a third-party consultant, carefully selected groups of non-competing dealership owners help each other to improve business practices. All 20 Group members receive monthly financial composites for comparisons and meet throughout the year.

The ideal group is made up of dealers who are not direct competitors so that information can be fully disclosed. As a member of a group, you have the ability to call on a number of trusted peers who

can provide assistance and advice on any issue you might be facing.

## Communicating with Customers

Another form of networking dealers should not forget about is that with customers. In order to build and maintain a healthy customer base, as well as to develop brand recognition, dealers should sustain communication with customers. Whether it is through direct-mail campaigns or follow-up phone calls, by contacting your current and prospective customers, you demonstrate that you care about their satisfaction and well-being, and you will be more apt to maintain regular clients.

And with advanced technology available today, maintaining an open line of communication with customers is easier now than ever before. Online social media outlets such as Facebook and LinkedIn enable anyone with Internet access to communicate from all corners of the globe. Not only are these websites free to utilize but they are also used by millions of people on a daily basis.

By setting up a Facebook account for your dealership, you will gain free exposure and build brand recognition. Your page can contain information pertinent to your dealership, such as what you do and your areas of specialty. Message forums also enable you to communicate one-on-one with individuals as well as to large groups of people by sending messages and announcements.

By utilizing websites such as Facebook, which began as a tool for students to communicate, you are directly reaching your younger customer base in a way in which they are comfortable communicating. *wqp*

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## NETWORKING TOOLS

*With networking more important now than ever before, the following resources can help you build your professional network.*

**National & Regional Tradeshows:** Industry tradeshows and conferences, such as WQA events, are some of the best ways to network with fellow water dealers.

Upcoming events include: **FWQA** annual conference (June 5-6); **Missouri WQA** Summer Meeting (June 11-13); **Indiana WQA** Annual Convention (June 24-25); **Texas WQA** Annual Convention (July 8-12); **Wisconsin WQA** Convention (Sept. 16-18); **WQA Mid-Year** Leadership Conference (Sept. 16-18).

**20 Groups:** Carefully selected groups of noncompeting dealers, with the assistance of a professional consultant, help each other

to improve business practices, planning and performance. All 20 Group members receive monthly financial composites for comparisons and meet multiple times throughout the year.

**LinkedIn:** An online interconnected network of professionals from around the world, representing 170 industries and 200 countries. You can find, be introduced to and collaborate with qualified professionals that you need to work with to accomplish your goals ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)).

**Facebook:** Gives people the power to share information and connect with one another around world. Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos and learn more about the people they meet ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)).