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Keeping in touch in the hybrid business world

Given the events of recent years, the world has experienced a huge rise in – and familiarity with – various technology platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams and Skype. These have enabled virtual communications on a scale previously unconsidered. They have also made many organisations reshape their working practices.

At the same time, recognising the benefits that being 'on-site' with colleagues can have on an individual's wellbeing and effectiveness, organisations are now adopting a hybrid approach – one that blends remote and on-site working -to fully create a more flexible working environment.

Such an approach also aligns with organisations' growing need to reduce the carbon footprint of their business-related travel and make more effective use of their people's time.

In this new hybrid business world, professionals must find the most appropriate way to communicate with and engage their clients and contacts.

In this Winning Business Digest we have examined key behaviours and thinking processes that help professionals retain and strengthen their business relationships in the hybrid working environment. In particular, we have focused on six best practice approaches when keeping in touch.



1 Seek out added value reasons

We should remember that with a business relationship we are not simply getting in contact for a chat (most of the time anyway). There should be a tangible reason – and the more beneficial it is for your contact, the more they'll value the interaction.

Knowing what's currently pressing and important for them and their organisation will give you a helpful steer; so invest time in catching up on their news in the public domain – the news section of their website, company and individual pages on LinkedIn, and key headlines from their industry sector's press, for example.

This will give you a good 'feel' for what's happening for them and some clues on what might be important to your contact.

Questions to consider: *What is likely to be 'front of mind' for your client? What would your contact find valuable in the context of your relationship with them? Have you asked them what they will find useful? What works for other contacts which you could try with this contact?*

2 Make your messages relevant – and obviously so

When it comes to business communications, the best client and contact engagement will flow from topics that are of direct interest to them.

As email inboxes have become even busier and letting calls go to voicemail first is the norm for many, it is important to get across your point as succinctly and clearly as possible. Being protracted or cryptic is likely to result in your communication being skimmed over or ignored.

Consider what would resonate most with your client or contact and will appeal to their interests. This isn't just about the substance of your message, but also in how you say it.

Relevance also applies to in-person relationship building activities. I remember a comment from a client who asked one of their clients why they never came to any of the sporting corporate hospitality they were invited to. The answer was a simple 'I don't like sport'.

Questions to consider: *What does your client or contact like doing? What are they interested in? How can you quickly make your communication highlight what's in it for them? What messages, phrases etc will pique their interest?*

3 Variety is the spice of life

As was the case before the Coronavirus pandemic, it is important to think of a variety of 'touch points' to use with a balance of:

- face time (meetings, informal catch ups, team event etc.),
- airtime (phone calls), and
- read time (emails, forwarding articles, newsletters etc).

The most successful professionals employ a variety of activities to create greater opportunity to add value, avoid repetition and ensure as many people can be involved as possible.

Relationship building takes both time and multiple interactions to impress someone and secure their trust. Using a variety of touch points will help you to demonstrate your credibility, professionalism and compatibility with your contact.

Create a simple plan and schedule time to do them, so you don't miss an important touch point during busy periods.

Questions to consider: *What touch points would best suit your client or contact given their individual preferences?*

Which medium is going to be most effective and convenient for them – an email, a call, a text message, a Zoom? Which will be one to one interactions and which will be team events?



4 Make it convenient for them

Many people have found a new way of working and are keen to retain it. This now includes spending less time in the office and/or on international travel. A flexible working habit has formed, and this involves giving greater priority to non-work commitments.

It is therefore important to respect that your clients and contacts will have different views and levels of comfort on embracing more in-person events. The more convenient you can make your interactions for them; the more they'll agree to them.

Think about what will work best for different time zones and, of course, be mindful of different weekends and public holidays in different territories – particularly if your practice has an international dimension.

Questions to consider: *What will be welcomed by your contact in their working environment? Can you be flexible to engage with virtual communication outside of the typical working day to fit in with their agenda and other commitments? Demonstrate by your behaviour, empathy and professional courtesy that you understand their situation.*



5 Make the most of virtual working/ networking benefits

Many people complain of 'Zoom fatigue' but we shouldn't forget the enormous benefits of online technology platforms. For one thing, it has helped to have 'face to face' communication with contacts in other countries and, of course, multiple locations at the same time in an easy-to-use way.

Some professionals have said that they were really struggling to get in front of some of their clients before the pandemic, but it was often easier to arrange a meeting using virtual platforms. Many relationships have since benefitted from discussing commonalities and the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

Also be mindful that people generally prefer virtual meetings to be shorter than in-person ones. Be sure to plan how best to use the time so your client or contact and you benefit from the interaction.

Questions to consider: *Are you fully proficient in the technology to deliver an engaging interaction online with your clients and contacts? Which clients and contacts favour virtual over in-person interactions? How do they prefer their virtual contact to be – a formal meeting with an agenda, or an informal chat over a virtual coffee?*



6 Be strategic and think about the purpose of the interaction

Last but not least, make sure you are clear about what you are trying to achieve in the interaction. What do you want your client or contact to get out of it and what do you want to accomplish?

Being clear on your purpose will guide you on the best medium for the interaction. Let's face it, certain relationship

building activities must be face to face. Virtual coffees, lunches and drinks don't quite work in the same way for some discussions. In contrast, certain activities (like training people in various locations) might now lend themselves to a virtual approach.

It is important to think about what you are planning, and what is going to make it as effective as possible for your contact and, of course, you.

Questions to consider:

What form of interaction will help you to achieve your purpose, given the context and your contact's circumstances and interests? Who needs to be involved? What do you need to prepare to achieve the purpose? What do you need to find out from your contact, and what questions will help you to do that?

What messages do you want to get across, and how will you do that professionally and elegantly?

Summary

The world has experienced much change recently, but adjusted accordingly. The hybrid working environment is bringing many benefits to both organisations and individuals and is therefore unlikely to disappear.

Successful professionals will be those who adapt and plan their 'touch points', considering what is possible, and appropriate for their various contacts. Think about the next steps for each 'touch point'.

Can you test your approach and ideas in your next conversation with that contact? Create a simple plan which you review regularly as things evolve in the hybrid environment. This will help you to maintain the frequency your contacts will value, and help you spot fresh opportunities to add value as they emerge.



This **Winning Business Digest** has been written by **Andrew Warren**. To request more copies of **WBD** or to find out more about our training, coaching and pitch support work please contact us at: results@winningbusiness.net

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