

In order to make the most of networks, designers should follow a set of simple rules. To network well, design professionals must be good listeners, aware not only of the words being spoken but of the atmosphere in which the words are uttered. They must seek to build trust; networking is focused as much on helping others as on helping yourself. Designers who constantly take information, but who do not return anything helpful, will find that their networks will cease to exist. And networking *is* work, work that requires persistence. But compared to “cold” calling, networking is also the quickest source of warm or hot leads. And it pays off. One well-known architect kept meticulous lists of contacts in every city. To him, his greatest asset was not pictures of his work, but the names in his network.

Cold Calling

The design industry develops many of its leads over the telephone. When the contact involves someone the designer does not know, the contact is referred to as a “cold” call. Design professionals make cold calls to do research on a given market and to uncover leads. The goal of a cold call is not to make a sale, but to make a friend. No one buys professional services based on a brief telephone call. The specific goals of cold calling are to establish a relationship and a dialogue, to get enough information to make it possible to decide whether or not to pursue the project, and to set up an appointment.

The first step in cold calling is to target. Decide on the type of client to be reached and the geography to be covered. Next, before the call is made, use association guides and the Internet to conduct a minimum amount of advanced research on the prospect. Identify the best person to speak with, and don't hesitate to go right to the top. Develop a list of questions to be asked. Finally, make the call.

The goal of cold calling is to make the person want to help. Callers should identify themselves by name, company, and a short tag line that identifies what they do. They then have approximately 20 seconds to establish rapport. They should express the need for help in a friendly, courteous manner, and set the stage for asking questions. Rather than simply reading off their list of questions, they should branch off and have a natural conversation, and return to the list to make sure everything has been covered. The conclusion of a cold call may be a simple agreement just to keep in touch, or it may seem reasonable to ask for an appointment, where face-to-face selling can begin.

Cold calling is not finished when the call is complete. It may be a good idea to send something: a note of thanks, a brochure, or a reprint. The goal of the cold call is to make the prospect open a file on the caller's firm. The designer who calls must also make a record of the call. If a contact record form is filled out (manually or electronically), it will help the designer remember the call when it is time to make a follow-up call, allow the firm to track the caller's activity, and make others in the firm aware of the calling activity so that the firm's efforts are coordinated. Design professionals should set aside a regular time for cold calling. Firms should set objectives—five calls a day, five calls a week, or five calls a month—and urge staff to keep at it; their comfort level will grow with experience.

QUALIFYING THE PROSPECT

Through networking or cold calling efforts, a design professional has uncovered a lead. It's a highly desirable commission: the design of a new museum wing. But this designer has spent a career designing patient rooms in hospitals. Should this designer pursue the lead anyway? An important part of the business development process in design firms is making go/no-go decisions. Not every client is right for every designer or every firm. The design professional who has spotted the lead on the museum project could spend a lot of money to get to the interview, working connections and writing convincing qualifications, but 99.9 percent of the time, the designer will be bested by a competitor with a half-dozen museum projects to his credit. If by some miracle the designer is selected (perhaps the designer's Uncle William is the curator), the hospital design firm will probably lose a bundle of money learning on the job, and irritate the museum client in the process.

Design professionals should understand that it is smart to walk away from a project opportunity when

- *The designer or the firm does not have the right kind of experience.*
- *The firm cannot put the right staff on the project.*
- *The client is notoriously difficult.*
- *The designer knows that no profit can be made.*