



## **What's a networking professional to do when COVID-19 shuts down onsite meetings? - by Ron Lanzo**

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As a career sales professional and now more than 12-year veteran here at AFR Furniture Rental, Inc., networking was a mainstay for developing new business. I had become dependent upon several networking groups or organizations to meet potential new customers. Networking was an integral part of my efforts to find and develop new business. It was a critically important part of my annual sales plan, which I often shared with our sales team, "Networking Works!"

Networking is not a guaranteed way of uncovering new business, and if done incorrectly will not produce the desired results. A major commitment and dedication are required to consistently attend these sessions. Since most of my networking groups were very early morning events which started at 8:00 AM, it required getting up early, well before first light! Sales professionals usually attend a minimum of 3 to 4 networking sessions per month! I was a member of two groups quite seriously,

Marshland Connections, founded, organized and run by Sarah Marsh of Marsh Architects. This group met on the third Friday of the month, 11 months per year. The month of August was the exception due to the number of members on vacation during this summer month. Sarah liked to start off the meeting with, "...Marshland Connections is a non-fee-based networking group that meets promptly at 8:00 AM." Another group BNI, or Business Networking International, was not a free group, and many of their chapters met at 7:30 AM! I made a few of these as an invited guest but catching a train at 4:30 AM didn't provide me enough motivation to make me beat the roosters up in the morning to attend. With the annual membership fee, I felt was a large commitment when you factored in both the membership fee and the weekly attendance costs. It was also a bit too structured for my sales style, and so I never chose to become a member, but still recognize how valuable this organization has been for those who have actively participated.

Another organization of which I was a member, was the New York Chapter of IFMA (The International Facility Management Association). I chaired the Networking Committee for more than two years, and religiously attended the monthly "Member's Only Networking Breakfast," which was held on the second Thursday of each month, and yes it too was held at 8:00 AM. We made lots of close personal friends, and to this day, the same familiar faces can be seen at networking events across the city of New York. Well that was before the Coronavirus, or COVID-19 pandemic struck. We enjoyed many personal referrals that turned into long-term customers as a result of these relationships.

The commitment one makes to joining, and to attending on a regular basis makes networking work! Membership in the right organizations and networking are critically important aspects to achieving your goals of new relationships built and new business developed. As I had previously, mentioned all of these in person meetings became a thing of the past, as they all went virtual thanks to the new video streaming technologies like ZOOM and Microsoft TEAMS. In the nine months since this pandemic literally shut down most of our office complexes across the nation, we were quick to adopt this new technology and put on a nice shirt and a happy face! Rumors ran rampant about many attendees still in their pajama bottoms or shorts as the summer months approached, but with a nice shirt, a broad smile and hopefully some nice lighting (we're all now just discovering the importance of lighting) we're able to continue networking with the same people each month only virtually.

Our sales efforts continue using the phone and email to stay in touch with our customers. We've seen many new opportunities arise using this distance sales approach. Of course, we're being hyperactive and responsive to each request be it an incoming lead, an existing customer or a referral we're contacting the client's promptly. Also following up with specific information about the project to include an accurate rental proposal, complete literature on what's being quoted, verifying the inventory is available and scheduling the delivery date. It's because of this effort to both continue networking and to stay in touch with our customers that we've managed to maintain at least a portion of our previous pre-pandemic business.

In conclusion, we're as committed today to our basic sales principals that customers come first, and that we will go the extra mile however difficult that might be to provide our customers with timely, rental furniture solutions that help them continue in business generating revenues. As a sales force,

the commercial segment here at AFR Furniture Rental, Inc., remains committed to providing exceptional service to all our customers, and we look forward to helping you with your next requirement.

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