

7 Ways to use your Chamber of Commerce membership to grow your business

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Whitepaper

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Boost

“When consumers know that a small business is a member of the chamber of commerce, they are 49% more likely to think favorably of it and 80% more likely to purchase goods or services from the company in the future” – scharipo research 2012

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Chamber of Commerce – A brief History

The first known Chamber of Commerce has been recorded in 1599 in Marseille, France.

In those days Merchants and Businesses banded together to protect their interests against common adversarial enemies such as Crooks, Thieves, Highwaymen, Robbers, Fraudsters, Con-Men and Government.

In New Zealand the oldest Chamber is the Auckland Chamber of Commerce with most cities and provinces having Chambers over 100 years old.

Whilst Chambers of Commerce have had a fairly long history of building business at any cost, the last 30 to 40 years has seen Chambers become more collaborative recognising that good healthy businesses, providing good jobs, have a direct impact on growing healthy communities and as a result of that - stronger economies.

In general Chamber philosophy is about “Freedom of Enterprise” and doesn’t subscribe to a particular political dogma but instead supports legislation, regulations and decision making that assist members go about their business with minimum interruption.

Most Chambers of Commerce are completely autonomous however it is fair to say that generally your local Chamber of Commerce will be interested in inspiring your business to grow and be a positive contributor to your local community.

The way that Chambers do this to positively influence the environment in which your businesses operates. This is done by providing training, advice, information, support and the ability to speak as one voice (Advocacy).

There is strength and credibility in numbers and speaking with a combined voice - your Chamber does this on your behalf solely to assist your business grow and prosper. Government, Local Government, Agencies and other organisations proactively seek out the opinions and thoughts of Chamber members to ensure they are taken into account when making decisions

Chambers are also seen as a credible source of knowledge and information for other organisations, due to our long standing position in the community. The Chambers enjoy close relationships with industry bodies within the local and national business communities including government, institutions, other associations and the media.

Most NZ Chambers of Commerce are aligned and met the requirements of the International Chamber of Commerce, or ICC which provides members with access to the largest business network in the world.

Growing your Business using your Chamber of Commerce Membership

There are numerous ways you can use your Chamber membership to grow your business. Like most strategies & tactics these can be rolled out gradually and sustainably without the need to invest in huge financial resources. There is plenty of information below – all good tactics to help you leverage. Have a plan of attack, maybe look at one activity per month.

Also included is a checklist that you can use to keep track of the activity you implement and the returns that you can measure from this activity.

1. Networking opportunities & Referrals strategy

Your Chamber of Commerce offers plentiful opportunities to network with other business people, locals and other members

BA5s

Business After 5s are a good way to meet others. BA5s are a “mix and meet” networking event usually hosted by the Chamber and another member. The event is usually held at the members premises or at an appropriate venue such as a bar or chartered club.

The purpose of the BA5 is to get together for the express purpose of learning about a members business, with a short formal speech and presentation followed by an hour or so of networking.

Referral Networks

Many chamber members take the opportunity to informally create referral networks with others they meet at BA5s and events. This way they can be on the lookout for business to refer to other members. This is a great way of obtaining referrals in return

Action Plan - Networking / Referrals

- ✓ Check Dates for upcoming BA5s and events
- ✓ Put these in your calendar
- ✓ Don't forget to RSVP to the organisers
- ✓ Check the Chamber members on the web page and take note of any that you may want to meet
- ✓ Ensure you have a supply of business cards
- ✓ Hone your “elevator pitch” for the event
- ✓ Turn up early
- ✓ Follow up the next day with any people you met and collected business cards from

2. Community Visibility Strategy

The Chamber of Commerce is a globally respected brand and consumers and businesses tend to prefer to deal with businesses that are members of a local Chamber of Commerce. (See the real value of Joining a local Chamber of Commerce: Research Study – www.schapirogroup.com - below). Once you've joined the chamber there are a number of ways to ensure that you let everyone know that you've joined.

Membership Directory

If your chamber offers a membership directory – make use of it. Not only is it a handy place for other members and people to find you but being online will offer a high quality link back to your website, which is important for placing your business higher on search engines

Chamber Collateral

Align your business with the Chamber by making sure you take every opportunity to display your membership alliance at your premises, on stationery, emails and websites. Use the opportunity to let absolutely everyone you deal with know that you are a member

Let everyone know you've joined your local chamber

Upon joining take the opportunity to let all customers, suppliers, prospective customers and others know that you are supporting your local economy by joining the Chamber. A simple email blast should do it

Action Points – Community visibility

- ✓ Join your local chamber
- ✓ Organise your listing on their membership directory
- ✓ Frame your membership Certificate and put in a public space at your business premises
- ✓ Download/request “member of” JPGs – attach to your email signature, website, communications and stationery.
- ✓ Let your Clients, Suppliers and other contacts know that you are have become a member of the local chamber and **invite** one of them to come along to the next event as your guest

3. Community Visibility Leadership Strategy

Getting involved in your Chamber of Commerce in a leadership role is generally easy to do and most welcome by other members of the Chamber executive.



Most Chambers elect a board every one or two years however various committees are formed by the board where members are invited to get involved and assist the Chamber with your particular expertise or interest. These committees are usually based around areas such as Membership, Advocacy, Finance, Events and relevant industry sectors.

Committees

Volunteer your services to join a committee based on your interests. You will generally get a good reception and instantly position yourself as a leader in your community by taking on a cause that will benefit the local economy

Advocacy – Drive an issue

Do you have a particular interest in how Government, local Government could assist the Chamber to drive projects or remove obstacles that impede Chamber members from growing. Take the opportunity to raise and drive an issue. Check with the advocacy committee. There may be work happening already on your particular issue. Take the opportunity to “own” a project and become a leader.

Niche Expertise

Do you have a skill, expertise or network that could benefit other members? Talk to your Chamber, they may be happy to work with you

Action Points – Community visibility

- ✓ Join your local chamber
- ✓ List the skills or expertise you may be able to bring to the Chamber
- ✓ Talk to the Chair of the membership committee or executive officer if the Chamber has one
- ✓ Figure out where your skill set would best be suited
- ✓ Let your Clients, Suppliers and contacts know that you are have become a member of the local chamber committee
- ✓ Make meetings and complete any projects that take your interest

4. Targeted Communications to Members – Strategy

Most Chambers have a monthly E Newsletter that not only goes out to members but also to people that are interested in local business news. These newsletters usually have a large circulation and are generally very well read with good open rates mainly because the content is relevant because they are geared towards local business news, events and issues. There are sometimes opportunities for members to advertise in the newsletters.

Got any news

Do you have any relevant news that you could forward to the editor. They are always looking for member good news stories. Also if you are an expert in an area that may be of value to other members you may be able to “pitch” a column. This will vary from Chamber to Chamber so check with your local newsletter editor

Advertising.

It is most likely that you will be able to advertise in the regular newsletter. Historically the rates for these will be minimal to advertise services in. Generally they are exclusively for members only to advertise and nonmembers will pay a premium to advertise (if allowed at all). As mentioned previously the click through and open rates on Chamber newsletters are high due to the nature of the content.

Action Points – Targeted Communications

- ✓ Check publication and deadline dates for newsletters
- ✓ Book in 12 months of space
- ✓ Tie advertising in with your marketing plan
- ✓ Check to see whether the news editor will accept “business interest” stories



5. Events & Promotions Strategies

The Chamber of Commerce is the world's leading networking association. Because of this your local Chamber will usually hold very good events and promotional activities. Members make use of these to network, profile their business and help other members. Some of these events have a set format such as the BA5 (Business after 5) or Awards ceremonies. You can get real value just by attending some of these events however you may be able to make some of the following work for you as well

Business After 5s

Can you host an after 5? This is a service you can buy as a member. Check with your local chamber. You provide the premises and refreshments and you get to profile your business for 15 minutes in front of an engaged audience. These are extremely good at building your business profile within your local community.

Promotional Event

Often used in conjunction with local media and a "launch" type event. You may be opening a new premises, launching a new product, announcing an acquisition these are all good reasons to work with your chamber to hold a one off gathering.

Collaboration Opportunities

Once you get to know other members you may be able to identify opportunities where one or more businesses may be able to get together and hold a one off event. Once again check with your local chamber. There are usually reasonable event management type charges with this type of service but these can be very effective in profiling and raising awareness of your offering

Action Points – Events and Promotions

- ✓ Check upcoming BA5 dates and any vacancies (These are usually booked well in advance)
- ✓ Does your business have a launch opportunities / opening on the horizon – check with your local chamber about dates and type of event. Also discuss with media partners the Chamber have relationships with – they can sometimes offer excellent packages
- ✓ Identify other businesses that you may be able to co-host an event. Examples I have seen include a BMW dealership joining with a Woman's clothing retailer to celebrate the opening of a new dealership showroom with cars on display with a "quick fashion show"

6. Special Deals Strategy

Your membership comes with great cost saving benefits. There are a number of deals that you can enjoy from not only local businesses but national sponsors as well. Current deals as of writing include 7c per litre discount on fuel with a Z card and telecoms deals with various partners that can only be matched by the benefits and buying power of larger corporates.

Your Offer

You may be able to offer a deal as well and tie this in to your marketing and sales activity. Make sure that any deal you offer is exclusive to members only. Use the offer as a way of beginning a relationship with another member. Marketing activity may involve promoting your offer to other members by advertising in the newsletter, contacting other members direct by phone / mail or by any other marketing means available to you.

Action Points – Special Deals

- ✓ Think about an offer that is not currently being met by your competition
- ✓ Talk to your local chamber about offering this. They may be able to add this to your listing on the member's directory or may even have a special page on their website for offers.
- ✓ Think about how you are going to pro-actively promote the offer and work into your marketing activity
- ✓ Book any advertising
- ✓ Start contacting other members with details of your offer



7. Business Support Hubs / Training / Information

Your Chamber is often the first stop when looking for advice, information or ways to be better at the “business” of business. Check your local chambers newsletters for training opportunities, advice lines, other members who are experts in Business matters (Lawyers, Accountants, Consultants, Marketing Experts, Business productivity experts)

Training

All businesses can benefit from a regular dose of upskilling, informational updates (eg new legislation) and training. The return on investment will usually far outweigh any cost. Seek out these events with your Chamber of Commerce. Some of the smaller Chambers may have a limited offering however they are usually connected to some of the larger Chamber offerings and you are often able to take advantage of these at preferential rates.

Action points – Training & Upskilling

- ✓ Identify which areas you need assistance with
- ✓ Talk to you chamber about any upcoming training
- ✓ Ask for referrals to any local experts who are members that may be able to assist your business
- ✓ Don't forget to take your cards to any training event (another opportunity to network)

Summary - leveraging your Chamber membership

Being thorough about your marketing activity, making a deliberate decision to work with your chamber and taking action on the seven strategies above will see your business grow its local profile, obtain more referrals, grow sales, get better at what you do and hopefully grow a committed and loyal customer base.

More about local marketing tactics - [Here](#)

Independent Chamber Research

In 2012 the Schapiro Group commissioned research on the value of Chamber membership.

[The full report can be downloaded here](#)

Independent Research – Summary of findings

1. *“When consumers know that a small business is a member of the chamber of commerce, they are 49% more likely to think favorably of it and 80% more likely to purchase goods or services from the company in the future”*
2. *“Most consumers (59%) think that being active in the local chamber of commerce is an effective business strategy overall. It is 29% more effective, however, for communicating to consumer that a company uses good business practices and 26% more effective for communicating that a business is reputable”.*
3. *“If a company shows that it is highly involved in its local chamber (e.g., sits on the chamber board), consumers are 12% more likely to think that its products stack up better against its competition.”*
4. *“When a consumer thinks that a company’s products stack up better against the competition because the company is highly involved in its local chamber of commerce, it is because he or she infers that the company is trustworthy, involved in the community, and is an industry leader.”*
5. *“When consumers know that a small business is a member of the chamber of commerce, they are 44% more likely to think favorably of it and 63% more likely to purchase goods or services from the company in the future.”*

About The Author – Jeff Smith



Jeff has successfully run and grown two Chambers of Commerce in New Zealand and has been able to take some of the experience picked up in these roles to assist and help businesses in growing and creating profitable enterprises.

In 2001 Jeff was in charge of rejuvenating the Wanganui Chamber of Commerce. During this time Jeff:

- Increased membership from 80 to 270 full financial members
- Created three major Chamber sponsorship categories
- With the local media created, sold sponsorship and managed the inaugural 2004 and 2005 Wanganui Business Awards. These are still being run today

In 2005 Jeff was asked to rejuvenate the Northland Chamber of Commerce – a 105 year old organization and:

- Increased membership from 180 to 430 full financial members
- Grew the Northland business awards year on year (2006, 2007, 2008) increasing entrants, creating new sponsorship categories, increased revenue and turning the event into the major fund raiser for the Chamber
- Advocated on behalf of members individually and as a group on a number of community economic growth projects
- Sought out, landed and delivered a number of contracts and projects to be carried out under contract to local & central Government

Jeff Smith runs [BOOST Business](#) which helps Businesses market & organise themselves and also runs [thousanddollarwebsites.co.nz](#) which supplies turnkey websites and education to help small businesses (all over NZ) attract customers.

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