

Making Business Personal
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One of the most common mistakes people make when building relationships for career success and revenue growth is treating business contacts differently than personal friends. Just think for a moment about the people you work with on a professional level who are also close personal friends. Aren't they always more forgiving when you slip up and more helpful when you're in need than new acquaintances are? Of course! I guarantee your work will be easier, more joyful, and more successful if you make more of your business relationships personal.

How to do it? The same way you make genuine friends. Build trust through intimacy; show them that besides being professional, you're human. Skip the small talk and go deep into what really matters -- your dreams or fears, your children or the business issues that keep you up at night. Even better, have new clients and contacts spend time with you and your family and friends.

A new friend of mine, Dr. Ajit Singh, CEO of the Oncology Care Systems Group of Siemens Medical Solutions USA, started taking his two daughters on periodic business trips a few years ago so he could spend more time with them. Ajit recalls a dinner during one such trip when his daughters were interspersed among eight adults at the table. "The conversation quickly took on personal overtones because everyone wanted to interact with my kids," he says. One potential customer asked Ajit's youngest daughter, "So, what are your dad's greatest weaknesses?" Ajit's daughter whispered something in the adult's ear, and the table roared. Soon there was talk of the latest Britney Spears gossip, and to this day, Ajit's daughter and that now-customer's daughter are "Internet buddies."

This is more than a great story. It's a best practice because of how many constituencies benefited from the experience. Ajit's daughters got to see firsthand what their father does at work, and through their travels they are consistently exposed to different cultures and parts of the country and world. Ajit spends time with his children he wouldn't have otherwise; and his presentations keep improving because his daughters, as Ajit reports, never fail to point out flaws in his writing on whiteboards or to alert him if his eye-contact is not evenly distributed among an audience. What about Ajit's customers? They are endeared to Ajit so much that they invite him -- along with his family, of course -- into their lives, to spend time with them and their families and friends.

As it turns out, there are also benefits for the bottom line. "Not only has that customer done business with us, they have also influenced other potential customers and helped us in establishing a number of key relationships in the market," Ajit says. "Sure, a lot of what we talk about involves our daughters. But it was all very genuine and a great surprise. I had no business motivations when I introduced my daughters to them."

We all have more opportunities than we realize to overlap our personal and professional

lives. A friend said to me recently, "Gee, I only have one night in New York. It's too bad I can't see client A because I should really see client B, instead."

My response: "Nonsense! Invite both clients out! And by the way, you've been single too long, so invite a date along, too!"

My friend thought of limitations, whereas I saw abundant opportunity. It's a chance to be face-to-face with two clients at once. (Plus -- you're not the only one who can be helpful to your client! You'll be surprised how another client or anyone else you know can help, also.) You can keep up your personal life by including a date, a significant other, or a few good, fun friends. Most important, it makes for a much more robust, personal conversation between everyone.

No, you probably won't have a chance to get your five bullet points out about why your product is better than the next guy's, but that's really not as unfortunate as you think. Chances are those bullet points won't make a huge difference when that person is deciding whose wares to buy. It's the personal, human relationship that matters most.

In this day and age, when our most scarce resource is time, the closest you can come to creating more time is by overlapping agendas. So take more of these opportunities to make business more personal, and please don't think your professional contacts will think less of you. In fact, usually the opposite happens. In most cases, this blurring of personal and professional lives seems to be good for business and good for our families, our friends, and ourselves.