

HOW-TO

Benefit from peer networking

BY JODY SHILAN

We're all familiar with business-to-business networking (B2B) as well as business-to-consumer networking (B2C). Well there's a category of networking that you've likely been involved with for years but rarely think about as a business networking opportunity.

It's what I call C2C networking. No, it's not consumer-to-consumer networking—but contractor to contractor.

Think about it, have you ever borrowed a truck, machine or attachment from one of your “friendly” competitors? Maybe taken some fill or boulders from his or her project and trucked it to yours, saving both of you time and money? You see, you've been C2C networking for years but have never really thought about its true potential or value in helping you grow your business.

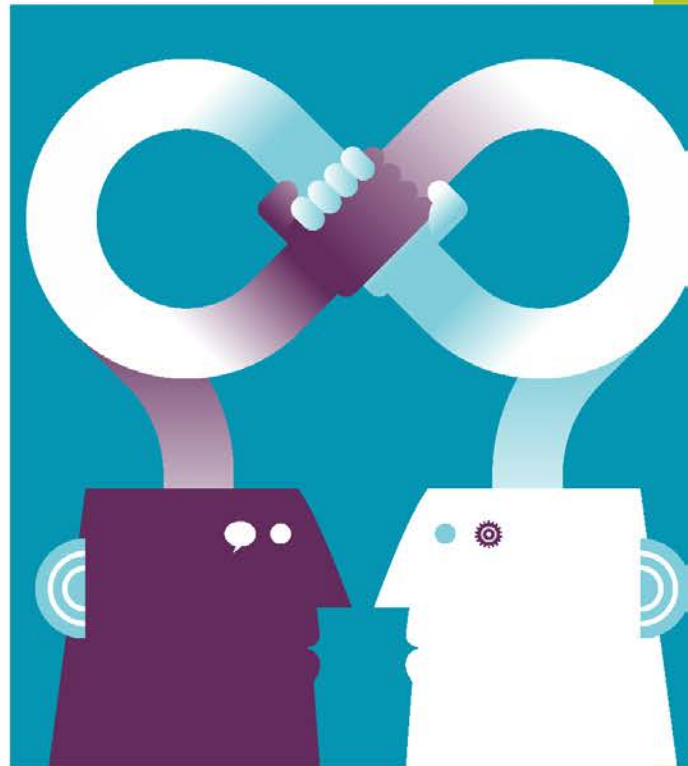
Who can better understand what it takes to be a landscape contractor more than another landscape contractor? Unfortunately, most business owners don't want to share anything with their competitors. What if you could strip away the fear of competition and just talk openly and honestly with other Green Industry professionals, sharing your thoughts and opinions on everything from equipment purchases to human resources issues? Even your financials.

These days there are so many opportunities to network with your fellow contractors, whether they are in the next town, the next state or the next country. Learning by trial and error has become way too expensive, and a few bad decisions can put you right out of business. Today you need information from people who have been there and done that and aren't afraid to share. People who will tell it like it is whether you want to hear it or not. People who are landscape contractors themselves.

To be successful at C2C networking you just need to be open to the idea. Here are three opportunities.

Association involvement

The first and most obvious place to begin your foray into C2C networking is through a landscape association. There is no better source of industry information than another



landscape contractor, and there's no better place to find one than at a landscape contractor association.

If you already belong to one you know the value of membership; if not, just keep reading. Landscape associations, by design, are groups of peers working together to improve their businesses and help the industry as a whole.

At the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association (NJLCA), we have worked very hard to break down the barriers between competing contractors to show them the value of working together. We frequently remind our members that they are not in competition against other NJLCA members; rather, they are competing against non-members, along with every other industry that competes for the same consumer dollars and disposable income that we do. Members are slowly starting to get the message.

Our most highly attended and successful meetings

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occur when one of our own members does a presentation on something his or her company does very well. It could be about snow, lawn maintenance or design/build. Whatever the topic is, when peers talk, everybody listens.

The cost of a state association membership is usually minimal—typically a few hundred dollars per year, depending on the company's size. In addition to the great networking opportunities, member benefits often include a health benefits program, member discounts and educational opportunities.

Peer groups

Another C2C opportunity is peer groups: collections of professionals (typically six to 12 contractors) who have scheduled meetings, both face to face and via conference calls, to openly discuss their businesses. Peer groups provide more structure to the sharing process than association memberships and are managed by facilitators or consultants. They can be made up of a local group of peers within driving distance of each other or a national

THE MORE YOU SHARE, THE MORE OTHERS WILL SHARE WITH YOU.



group of landscape contractors that are in different states.

Professionally managed peer groups have specific criteria for their members, such as company size, type and/or geographic location. The cost of these types of peer groups can run anywhere from \$1,500 to

\$10,000 or more a year, depending on the frequency and intensity of the meetings. Meetings can be held once a month, once a quarter or once a year. They can happen in person or via a conference calling bridge.

A great way to try out C2C networking is to attend the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET's) Green Industry Conference (GIC) in Louisville, Ky., held every October, and participate in the Breakfast with Champions event. It features many roundtable discussions, where you and nine peers enjoy breakfast while



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discussing a specific topic that is assigned to your table. One of the greatest things about this event is that you have no idea who's going to sit down with you. It could be anyone from a kid just out of college looking for advice on how to get started in the industry to the owner of a multimillion-dollar landscape company looking to share his or her experiences with you.

PLANET membership ranges from \$340 for a smaller contractor to \$8,820 for companies worth more than \$100 million.

Social media

If you're still not sure if these opportunities sound good to you, a third and very convenient way to C2C network is online. The business social media site LinkedIn is a great example. There are dozens of "groups" that focus on Green Industry topics and are filled with companies seeking advice or willing to give it on almost any topic. And it's free. I am a member of several of them, including

"Landscape Design-Build" and "Landscape Construction." I also belong to several association groups including Landscape Ontario and the APLD. Outside of LinkedIn there are various landscape and lawn care industry message board sites where many companies get great advice, especially early on in their careers.

One last option to consider is membership websites where you can C2C network through an open discussion forum, weekly conference calls or online virtual peer groups.

However you decide to get involved with C2C networking, I can promise you one thing: The more you share, the more others will share with you.

That's good advice from one contractor to another. **LM**



QUICK TIP

A great way to try out C2C networking is to attend the Green Industry Conference and participate in the Breakfast with Champions event.

Shilan, a Landscape Management columnist, is an award-winning landscape designer, consultant and former contractor. He's executive director of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association and editor of the membership site FromDesign2Build.com.



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