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Strengthening your network could assure your company's survival | Opinion

By James S. Cassel
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Social distancing has diminished in-person interactions, weakening our connections. With strong relationships essential to the fabric of middle market success, maintaining and strengthening these bonds should be a priority. Here's what to consider:

Reach out and tune in: Networking in the age of COVID means regularly checking in with customers, clients, and partners and showing genuine concern for their wellbeing. Send texts to those you haven't spoken to in a

while. For associates who you are closer to, use video conferencing. More personal than a phone call, text, or email, it can let you read body language and provide greater insight.

Fortify your links and be comprehensive. Connect with everyone who might benefit from your expertise or services, not just business clients. A targeted email blast reminding people you are available is an option. Consider volunteering your talents or services, which is another great way to meet new people and potential clients, expanding your relationships and network, and an excellent way to do good while demonstrating the value you bring to the table.

Virtual happy hours can be another great way to connect with the top brass at other companies, and with your own team and their networks as well. You can be the organizer or join with another group organizing them. These can be structured to ensure you are spending time with the right people. You can also invite prospects enabling the development of new relationships. And sometimes, having a guest speaker on a relevant topic can be an interesting and educational draw.

For your company, consider virtual team-building exercises. Not only can they boost morale, but they are a great way to pick up on cues from colleagues, helping identify those who may be struggling. Remember that your staff's network is just as important as yours. Struggling employees may not be in the best mindset to meet new people or maintain old relationships. So, it's important to check in and make sure they know you are there to support them.

If you can find creative ways to meet individually with key players in a socially distanced setting that you are comfortable with, find the time and safe place, and do it. But be careful not to press them into meeting if they don't feel OK. If meeting in person is not an option, a one-on-one Zoom call or an email are also effective.

What to listen for and how: As you engage your network, understanding the group's physical and emotional health is paramount.

Don't just focus on the bottom line. Be sensitive to different needs. Some may have been working from home alone all this time and could use support from others. Others may be dealing with multi-generational households, or children and homeschooling, and are hoping for less team-building and more time

addressing home issues. Strike the right balance.

For some, the challenges may be financial. For others, the impacts can come down to health: physical, psychological, or both.

What to do with what you learn: Follow-through is everything. If you get useful intel and don't use it, you've wasted your efforts and may even have let down those anticipating your support.

Not all help is about business, and not all assistance means making a grand, sweeping effort. Remember, a small gesture at the right time can go a long way, so think outside the box when it comes to how you can help.

As for enduring the challenges of the continuing pandemic, the verdict isn't in. Making it through seems more a marathon than a sprint.

Some of us are coping better than others. Running a successful middle market business means knowing how people connected to it are getting by. That means creating opportunities to listen and acting on what we learn.

If your network is healthy, then your company has a much better chance to be as well.

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