

## Easy Endorsements

--Bart Jackson

The ice is out; the creeks are running. 'Tis the season for us whitewater paddlers to gather at the riverside in small clusters and catch up. We talk about gear as if our lives depended on it. They do after all. Paddles, helmets, life vests are reviewed. An appreciative nod or derisive snort is enough to send out ripples through the boating community, winning or losing thousands of dollars for companies that will never know. Referrals mean survival, in every business.

Yet for most firms, winning such endorsements remains an uncharted mystery. Sales coach Sandy Schussel attempts to steer entrepreneurs and salespeople toward calm water in his talk, "The Power of Referral Marketing," on Thursday, March 11, at 6 p.m. at the Harrison Conference Center at Merrill Lynch. Cost: \$38. For more information call 609-924-7975 or visit [www.NJAWBO.com](http://www.NJAWBO.com). Sponsored by the Mercer Chapter of the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners, this dinner meeting and forum is designed for small and mid-size company owners, as well as sales professionals at all levels.

A north Jersey native, Schussel has spent his entire adult life in fields that are totally referral dependent. After earning a political science degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1972, he tried his hand at acting on Broadway. From there he shifted to a career he now thinks of as equally surreal — law. Graduating from New England Law School, Schussel clerked, then opened up his own practice in Caldwell, with a second office in Belle Mead.

Today, Schussel runs Princeton-based consulting firm Brass Ring Coaching ([www.brassringcoaching.com](http://www.brassringcoaching.com)). He is the author of "The High Diving Board: How to overcome Your Fears and Live Your Dreams," a book in which he outlines the non-conventional stream he navigated in landing a satisfying career.

Consider the typical referral seeker, he urges. The job is finishing up, his crew has not yet cleaned up the job site. He shuffles hesitantly over to the customer, presents him with the final bill, and then shoves another paper at him, mumbling "Ah, I hate to ask this of you, but if you could sign this endorsement, I could use you as a reference — and you could, you know, tell other people about how you liked the work."

Make sure that you appear uncomfortable and humble while making this request. Squeeze your hat continually in your hand. Emphasize how you would like to take pictures and traipse strangers through the customer's home, making his private domicile your show piece. Then appeal to his sympathy by announcing that it would really help you and you truly need the work. Count on pity as a great motivator. But, if you do, warns Schussel, don't count on winning any business.

"So many business people just totally misunderstand the whole concept of referring business," he says of this approach. "It is a process by which everybody wins — owner, old customer, and new customer." Also, he insists, referrals must be an inherent part of your marketing effort.

Understand referral benefits. "Get off your knees," insists Schussel, "and stop seeing a referral as a favor received. It's not about only you."

When you afford a customer the "opportunity" (Schussel's term) to recommend the quality of your product to someone else, you help him in three ways. First, most people simply like to help and chat about their experiences. Second, they get to be a hero to their friends for linking them up with this valuable firm; and third, they are able to appear to be in the know.

Help your customer become an expert with valuable information to share. "If you want to

know anything about dress suits (or custom kitchens, or travel agents, or graphics designers), ask John. He'll put you in touch with a real pro." The trick here is to allow your customer to pass on the good news in his own way, without making him a street corner preacher.

Establish a referral system. Every transaction should have a pre-set point where the referral network is launched. How much better our shuffling, mumbling business owner would have done if he had made a date with the customer to return and check up on his product, to make sure that all was well with the job. Then, presenting him a bottle of brandy as a gift, he could sit down and discuss any problems or improvements the customer would like to see in the job. While he's being impressed with his service, (and that he has somehow learned his favorite type of brandy) the reference request could be casually mentioned.

In Schussel's experience, 20 percent of clients will always offer a good reference, 20 percent never will, and the remaining 60 percent sit on the fence, waiting to be asked properly. Your technique may include asking to take pictures of your product in use in your client's shop, but the request should always be accompanied by the promise of special consideration. Tell this customer how happy you would be to give any of his friends special service, and perhaps even a small discount when they mention your name. As the new client comes aboard, follow up with a small, unexpected gift to the client who referred him.

Be worthy of a referral. Your work will earn you a reputation. Like it or not. Schussel emphasizes that "it is important to not just satisfy a customer, but to make him enthusiastic about you." His favorite story is of a shoe salesman who, after showing a customer virtually every style in the store, learns that the client wants a style that is not in stock, but that the store down the street does carry. The sales person runs down to the other store, buys the shoes, brings them back, and sells them to the customer at the sale price.

He rings up the sale and subtly lets the customer know what he has done. The customer is shocked. "Why did you ever do that?" he asks. The sales clerk replies, "Just my job, sir. I'm here to make sure you never buy your shoes at any other store." Guess how many times the customer told that story? Yet such an organized system of making yourself referable does not happen overnight, warns Schussel. It takes concerted effort.

Develop a referral network. For most businesses, half of all sales come from old customers and the people they refer; 30 percent come from clients who chose largely at random; and the remaining 20 percent come as a result of other marketing techniques. Up the odds of pulling undecided customers into your boat by networking yourself into a good referral position.

Simple things like joining local and state chambers of commerce can establish your name. This is scarcely a small business only tool, insists Schussel. The salesman from a big pharmaceutical company will find himself benefiting just as much from connections made with professional associations, and even with local churches and town government. You never know.

Delve into your niche. Business cycles continuously through the specialist-versus-generalist argument. Currently, the generalists seem to hold sway, claiming that companies should not be so narrowly focused that they lose sales. People want a one-stop supplier, they say. Schussel disagrees, pointing out that the owner who deepens his niche offerings becomes the much-sought-after specialist whose name becomes connected with his product.

This year, as the kayakers gather by the river, one racer tells of a paddle that snapped yesterday and how the manufacturer sent out a replacement blade by courier so that he could make the next day's competition. A few heads nod, impressed. The paddle maker has extended his showroom without even knowing it, winning customers on that cold river bank.