

The Power of Networking

by John Ruka

NETWORK: “A group of individuals who interacts around a particular mutual interest for the benefit of each and all!”

The private, independent instructor is often isolated from others of like mind, however formal settings encourage networking. Networking organizations like the Percussive Arts Society, the International Association of Rudimental Percussionists and Vic Firth’s Education Programs were advanced by foresighted university or corporately-active teachers, or by percussionists from larger, already-in-place networks (Drum Corps International, for instance). But, how can the private instructor tap into networking?

First, take advantage of net-working opportunities represented by the aforementioned groups and others like them. These organizations exist precisely to share information. Volunteer to serve in some capacity yourself (I edited the Wisconsin PAS chapter newsletter for a period of time). Valuable friendships develop this way. Look to the Internet (PAS has the World Percussion Network at <http://www.pas.org>, for example).

Locally, joining networking organizations like your local Chamber of Commerce adds credibility to your enterprise, especially if you are not working in a store. Your church, your kids’ school, even your band members are loose “networks” to be cultivated, too. Let them know your passion for teaching and good things will happen!

Now to your most vital networking opportunities...the first is easy: your student body and their parents! You want to hone your skills and grow your business. Students and parents are a silent “network” for business improvement ideas. Seeking advice from customers is not poor business. If bills are repeatedly late, talk to some trusted students or parents to find out what you can do to improve your billing system. They’ll be flattered and appreciate you even more! Students and their parents are also the best “bird dogs”. Offer some free lessons to a student who refers a friend. Talk about your offer to parents, too, who usually foot the bill; they’ll wrack their brains to find someone in their personal network of neighbors, friends and co-workers to drop your name on.

The most important home front network to cultivate is also the most difficult: your so-called “competitors.” Rid yourself of the notion that it’s “every man for himself” for private teachers. You can only teach so many lessons a week—then what? Help one other instructor across town build his roster and you’ll begin to establish a small network which can carry over into the pooling of students for concerts; running big field trips; bringing in major clinicians; and much, much more! That translates into more bucks in the bank for both of you because, as amenities increase, so does the perceived value of your lessons. You and your “competitor” can congratulate each other for having the moxie to network! Everybody wins!

The ultimate is a real networking organization like the Drum Instructors’ Guild. We are stunned by our accomplishments, sharing not only teaching ideas and references, but also building stable futures by tackling tax issues, career development, financial planning and other concerns of the private independent. This is networking for the 21st Century — a brighter tomorrow!

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