

# Finding and Engaging Business Partners

By Brett Pawlowski



**O**ne of the biggest challenges in partnership development is finding partners to work with. Many educators feel that they do not have the kinds of existing relationships with potential partners that they need to recruit them; and to add to the challenge, many educators are also uncomfortable making cold calls—just like the rest of us—to connect with the people they want to reach. As a result, partnership development continues to get pushed to the back burner, and year after year, most schools fail to see the kinds of results that a vibrant base of partners can provide.

There's good news, however. Many of you have a far larger network than you may realize. And even in those cases where you don't have existing relationships, you don't need to make cold calls. The key is to find opportunities for "warm calls," which just means taking advantage of existing connections to build your new relationships. By focusing on warm calls, you and your future partners will already have something in common, like a mutual contact or a shared interest, which will serve as a jumping-off point for your discussion.

## Developing a Target List

Before you get out there, however, you need to develop a plan. Yes, you want partners, but which ones? Who are your best partnership prospects? Who's most likely to want to work with you and have the resources to do so?

You can identify many of your best potential partners by doing a little research. You'll want to look at the larger employers in your field, of course, but remember to also focus on the smaller, fast-growing "gazelle" companies that sometimes have more flexibility and freedom than their larger corporate counterparts. Remember also to look at smaller mom-and-pop operations, which can make an outsized impact on your program, given their interest in community support and the kinds of opportunities that a small business environment can provide. And don't forget other types of partners, including postsecondary institutions and non-profits, including general non-profits, as well as those that specifically serve youth.

There are organizations in your city, region and state that can identify the largest and fastest-growing companies, often broken out by industry sector,

thereby providing you with an excellent starting point. The types of organizations may vary from one community to the next, but most often, you're looking for your chamber of commerce, economic development corporate (EDC) or an industry sector group. You may also search for published industry directories or even your local phone book to supplement your research.

Doing research through these channels will provide you with a strong initial list of the largest and fastest-growing companies in your area. But remember that it's only a starting point. As you start to reach out through your network, let people know that you would like inroads into the major companies you identified, but that you're also very interested in their suggestions, as well.

## Tapping Into Your Personal Network

No matter how few business connections you currently have, your existing network of relationships can take you much farther than you might expect. Consider reaching out to new contacts through the following groups:



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#### **Fellow Teachers and Administrators**

Every one of the teachers in your building, whether in the career and technical education (CTE) field or not, has contacts in the business world who might be interested in the work you’re doing. It may be a professional contact, like another teacher’s business partner, who may know people in your field. It may be a relative of a fellow teacher. But the first place to start would be to talk with your colleagues about your desire to connect with businesspeople, and ask them to work through their contacts to see what kinds of introductions they can make.

#### **Vendors**

You and your administrators deal with many vendors to supply your programs with needed materials. If you’re buying the same kinds of materials that businesses in your field are buying, then the odds are that your vendors are also selling to businesses in your industry and in your area. Tell your vendors what you’re looking for and ask if they know of anyone they can introduce you to; this would give them a chance to help out two customers at once! Vendors themselves can also partner with you; they have expertise and access to materials, and they look good to their customers when they demonstrate their support for the workforce of the future.

#### **Current Partners, Volunteers and Guest Speakers**

Even if you don’t have all the partners you want, you probably have at least a handful of active and committed businesspeople who have already bought into your program. Whether these are CEOs or individual businesspeople serving as mentors or volunteers, they all understand firsthand what you’re doing and can act as recruiters and advocates. They can reach out to their peers or simply encourage others at their companies to work with you.

#### **Advisory Board Members**

Your advisory board exists to support your program, and that includes finding resources—including partners. This should be one of the listed job responsibilities of your advisory board leadership, and in addition to regularly asking for help at your advisory board meetings, you might also consider making the partner-recruiting function a formal role for your board, setting up a committee devoted to partnership development.

#### **Parents**

Parents are an often-overlooked component of your network. But if you’ve had a chance to get to know them, you know that some may be well-connected in the community; in fact, some may even work at the companies on your target list! And of course they have a powerful motivation to see your program succeed.

#### **Postsecondary Partners**

In many communities, particularly in rural areas, secondary-level CTE programs often have active relationships with educators at their local two-year and four-year colleges, including not only articulation agreements or dual-credit arrangements, but also sometimes sharing advisory boards. These educators have their own networks of businesses within your shared industry sector and will likely see the value in helping their partners connect with students at the secondary level.

#### **Former Students**

Have you kept in touch with any students after they’ve graduated? You’ll likely find that at least some of them have pursued a career in your field, possibly even working at some of your target companies. These students can become partners almost immediately, returning as guest speakers and as mentors. And who would be in a better

position to represent the value of your program to a prospective partner than a valued employee who you introduced to the industry? If you don't currently have relationships with former students, start working now to stay in touch with current students as they graduate from your program; it will be rewarding for you both.

### Personal Interests

You have a life outside of school, whether it's involvement in your church, a civic group, charitable work, an athletic league or all the above. Each of these activities puts you in touch with people you would not have otherwise met, and who have personal and professional networks of their own. As you talk casually with others in your groups, you may find some new inroads into your target list or learn about other companies that might be a good fit for your program.

### Taking Advantage of Networking Organizations

Up to this point, we've looked at maximizing your own personal and professional networks to make industry contacts. But there are also organizations that exist in large part to help you make these kinds of connections, and educators who get involved in these groups can see significant benefits.

You've already looked to your chamber of commerce, EDC and other groups as a source of information in learning about the industry landscape. But information is just one of the values that these groups offer; another lies in connecting their members to one another. Go back and look at that list of connector organizations again. Do they accept memberships? Do they have committees that would be relevant to you, such as an industry-specific committee, or one focused on education or workforce issues? Do they have general gatherings or special events you can attend? Be sure to fully explore the opportunities they have available, and make an effort to get involved so that you can meet your business counterparts in a professional forum.

Many business organizations have specific initiatives to support education in general, to connect their members to schools and even to advance their stated workforce efforts. The Detroit Chamber

of Commerce, for example, organizes bus tours that take business leaders to multiple schools in a day to tour the facilities and meet their teachers and administrators. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce actually serves as the district's partnership office. Others run innovative programs like matching up business leaders as mentors to new school administrators, organizing site tours for local students or underwriting materials that provide career information to schools in their area. So look to these networking organizations not only for introductions to their members, but also as prospective partners in their own right.

### How to Connect to Prospective Partners

It's one thing to know you have access to prospective partners, but it's another to make the contact and forge the relationship. To move from your first contact to some type of active partnership, there are generally three stages involved, as outlined below. These are not formal stages: You might cover all these bases in a single conversation at a chamber event, or it may take months, and many meetings, before all parties feel comfortable in advancing to a formal relationship. But as a rule, you'll want to make sure to address these steps in some way.

#### The Introduction

Once you have identified who you're going to contact, you need to reach out to prospective partners. If you found out about your prospect through someone in your network, the best thing you can do is leverage that relationship as much as possible in making the introduction. If they can't make the introduction personally, they may allow you to use his or her name in your own outreach, which is still helpful. If you have no personal connection to the business, it's still entirely possible to reach out on your own via phone, e-mail or by introducing yourself at an industry event. Remember that even though your prospect doesn't realize it yet, you have powerful shared interests, and you could both benefit greatly by working together. You're not asking for charity, and you're not selling anything: You're exploring a professional relationship of shared benefit.

#### The First Meeting

Since you initiated the relationship, you should make the time commitment to travel to the prospect's business, which saves the prospect time and conveys the message that you want to learn more about what the company does. At this first meeting, you'll want to learn about your prospective partner, touring their facility and learning about their work; you'll want to educate them on what you're doing; and you'll want to emphasize your shared interests. If all goes well, you will have found common ground for talking further about how you can work together.

#### The Second Meeting

Now that you've visited their offices and learned what they do, it's time to introduce them to your program through a site tour. If your prospective partner is interested in visiting your program, try to make sure the meeting happens during the school day: You want them to have a chance to meet your students and see your teachers in action. As you tour the building, remember to highlight the successes and the positive aspects of your program: Don't focus on the shortcomings, the needs or the resource challenges. And keep your focus on the students—too many educators (especially administrators) default to talking about the facilities.

Once you've talked and visited each other's sites, you'll likely have some idea as to how you can work together. They may fit in with one of your existing partnership initiatives, perhaps taking a seat on your advisory board, joining as a mentor or volunteer, or participating in some other existing initiative. Or they may move into new territory, like setting up a real-world challenge for students with their business. No matter what form your new relationships take, as long as they're centered on the needs of students, staff and your partners, you'll be making strides toward building a strong and sustainable partnership program. **Tech**

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