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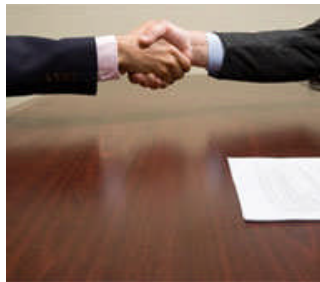
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Small Biz Growth Secret: Creative Partnerships

By [Sharon McLoone](#)



Entrepreneurs often have a “go it alone” mentality driving their companies, but in this ailing economy an increasing number of small business owners are finding that creative partnerships are the path to success.

Helen Halloran has owned a florist shop for 25 years in Concord, Mass., and says that today “it’s definitely harder to grow. You’re working harder for every dollar because customers are more reluctant to spend.”

But even in the face of adversity, her MainStreet-style [business is growing](#) and so are many others. So what’s their secret? Creative partnerships.

Here are some partnering tips from [small business](#) owners who run small shops that act big thanks to strategic alliances.

1. Join the Shop Local Movement

Halloran strongly believes in the “10% Shift” movement put together by a group of [entrepreneurs](#) who say that if five million households in New England shifted 10% of their existing purchases from non-local businesses to locally owned and independent businesses, thousands of new jobs would be created. She is active in her local independent business alliance and advises other towns to create a similar groups.

2. Buy from Fellow Small Firms

Halloran purchased most of her printing needs through a national florist industry printer for many years, but this year made a switch. “I was about to reorder by [business](#) cards and floral enclosure cards from the Web when I suddenly stopped what I was doing and walked across the street and placed the order with my local printing shop for about the same amount of money. I’m helping the local economy now. We can give each other a boost.”

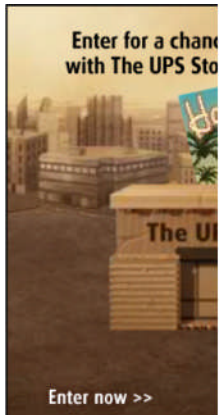
3. Cross Promote

She gives a museum in nearby Lincoln, Mass., a free floral centerpiece each week for its café. She also leaves discount cards and location information near the centerpiece, which have generated a lot of business. For Valentine’s Day, she partners with a hair salon that includes a crystal vase in a gift package encouraging the buyer to bring it to her shop to be filled with flowers. She also has partnered with hotels that bring her wedding referrals.



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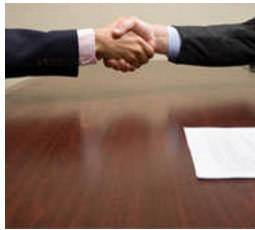
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4. Join Networking Groups

Kathy Strauss, the creative director at [Imagewerks](#), a communications design firm in Lake Ridge, Va., uses multiple networking groups to bond with other small firms. She has drummed up plenty of referrals and developed business relationships by regularly attending meetings at several local chambers of commerce and setting up a booth at local trade shows. "It's more imperative than ever to form alliances and partnerships," she says. "If we're not out there networking, there is absolutely no way the phone would ring."

5. Build a Trusted Business Network

Bob London, the president and founder of [London Ink](#) in Potomac, Md., acts as a virtual vice president of marketing for firms that aren't ready to hire a full-time marketing director. He meets with a group of business peers at least once a month to discuss how they can share leads and grow their businesses. Recently, they pooled their marketing dollars to rent a bus to take clients to Twin Tech, a networking event for the technology community in Washington, D.C. Each of the business friends coordinated the invitation list and shared its progress via Google Docs ([Stock Quote: GOOG](#)). The bus generated a lot of buzz within the community and enhanced the status of the partners.

6. Share Your Virtual Business Network

London has been using online social networking tools [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) for years. He shares his network with his closest business friends and they each have about 700 people to connect and partner with through the [online services](#). "There's some real leverage there when we each tap into each other's networks," he says.

7. Join Listserves

Strauss also belongs to several listserves with designer, photographer and editor members. When she needs help on a project, she posts an inquiry on the listserv and broadens her two-person company as big as it needs to be for a certain project. This way she's able to offer clients not just her design specialty, but as a full-service shop by offering writing, copy editing and Web development and in multiple languages if necessary. "No [small business](#) can be a jack of all trades," says Strauss. "But by forming partnerships you can be a turnkey operation."

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