

Get Business to Come to You

Ask most service providers how they get business, and the answer is "referrals" or "word of mouth." Carter Prescott, head of New York-based Carter Communications, which provides high-level writing and speaking services for Fortune 500 clients, doesn't even have a listed phone number. "I've never needed one," she says. "It's better to have people call you on their own, rather than soliciting calls anyway. You get a better client that way."

True, but you still have to work to generate referrals. Even your most loyal customers aren't likely to think about generating business for you -- they've got their own fish to fry. So try these surefire methods to build your word-of-mouth business:

1. Offer incentives for referrals that turn into business. They can be in the form of discounts on future business, free estimates or samples, or just plain cash. Even a small offer will catch their attention.
2. Create a referral form, and send it to clients or customers with your invoice for services rendered. If you've done a good job, the time to leverage yourself is upon completion of the project.
3. Tap your suppliers for leads, by reminding them that when your business grows, theirs does, too. Spark this exchange by giving leads to your suppliers.
4. Ask prospects who have turned you down for referrals. This gives them a graceful exit from a potentially unpleasant task. The only secret, as with any request, is to time it appropriately so that you offer people a natural, unforced opening to help you.