

ESSENTIAL TOOLS NEEDED TO GET RESULTS AND THRIVE FROM YOUR NETWORKING

MODULE NINE

Module Nine – Strategic Alliances

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Where are you now as this e-course is nearly finished?

Are you on track with this e-course? What are you noticing about the time you put to one side to focus on your networking? Have you noticed that your attitude towards it has altered or even changed completely perhaps? What has been the most challenging part for you and which has been the easiest? Are you logging what's been happening?

Before you go any further, ensure that you have fully noted and completed the action points where stated, so that you too can make headway in your business networking strategy.

Right, here we go, the part about creating strategic alliances with your network.

Creating Strategic Alliances with Your Network: Mistakes VAs Make

When it comes to creating strategic alliances, very few VAs actually do this.

They will be fantastic at promoting someone else's product or service because they've had a great experience from it, they will also be great at nurturing relationships with their fellow networkers, but when it comes to creating a formal alliance, something fails to happen.

- VAs sometimes feel awkward about asking others to help promote their services on a more formal arrangement;
- They may not always see the benefit of forming a strategic alliance;
- VAs sometimes fail to spot the opportunity of an alliance with key people in their network;
- VAs often fail to see their clients as a possible strategic partner;
- VAs are not always familiar with the formation process and operational aspect of a strategic partnership.

Let's look at ways to ensure you create strategic partnership opportunities to boost your income and profile.

What is a Strategic Alliance?

According to Wikipedia "A strategic partnership is a formal alliance between two commercial enterprises, usually formalised by one or more business contracts but falls short of forming a legal partnership or, agency, or corporate affiliate relationship. Typically, two companies form a strategic partnership when each possesses one or more business assets that will help the other, but that each respective other does not wish to develop internally."

A strategic alliance with a business means that you are:

- Either opening up opportunities for a passive income to boost your finances and this can be in the form of a one-off referral fee or an ongoing commission called an affiliate fee; or
- It can be a joint project where you both work together to create a product or service to fulfill a need and the both of you will earn a specialist income; or
- It is an exclusive agreement between two business owners on joint profile raising which helps to significantly open up and widen the network and contacts, which in turn opens up more business opportunities.

What Opportunities Could Be There Already?

I've been very fortunate indeed in the fact that I've made some great connections with some amazing people. Through attending networking meetings, networking online, networking with my clients and with connections of my contacts, I've created some brilliant strategic alliances.

However, as I have mentioned right from the start of this e-course, before people do business with you, they like to get to know you, develop trust as well as, in many cases, a friendship. Then the business follows.

The same is relevant when creating strategic alliances. As you can imagine, there have been many people keen to ask for my help to get their product or service promoted to the VA industry. However, before I can put my name to anything, I have to avoid doing the VA industry an injustice. I do this by getting to know the person behind the business, and assessing their values and ethics; I like to get to know the product or service and how it is a benefit to the VA industry and/or to their clients. I prefer to build a relationship before I then decide if I can put their product or service out there.

Now, believe you me, I've made some wrong decisions in the past and missed out on some great opportunities. BUT these situations are far outweighed by the opportunities that I went with and the strategic alliances I formed.

It took me a while before I had the confidence to trust my judgement in the early years, or even to boldly approach people with an idea. When it came to trust, I learned one crucial lesson, if you have an idea, protect it. You can do this by requesting that the people whom you speak with sign an NDA which stands for "Non Disclosure Agreement". This means that, unless they have shared with you a similar idea that they are proceeding with already, they are not to disclose the information shared with any third party and they are not permitted to carry out the idea for their own benefit.

What was interesting was that in some cases, when I had an idea of a service or product that could be really useful for VAs or indeed their clients, I seemed to attract the people who could help to make it happen. Either people who had already developed the product or service or people who had the specialist skills to help create it.

In fact, I realised that some of the clients I was providing VA services to had a product or service that, once slightly adapted, would be ideal for VAs or indeed for the clients of the VAs.

Sometimes it meant meeting people or being introduced to people who had created a product or service and then it spurred on the idea of how that could be useful for VAs or their clients. In other cases, I asked for introductions, or met via networking meetings, those who had the skills to help me create a product or service which would benefit VAs or their clients.

Either way, both worked well.

You may have a client or networking contact who has already created and is running a service which, with some adaptation for your niche, could work out an even more unique situation.

My aim has always included the following:

1. What is there out there that would make the way a VA worked more effective and efficient?
2. What product or service is out there that would enable the client of the VA to benefit in some way?
3. What is out there that will enable the VA to develop a specialist skill which in turn can help him or her boost their income opportunities?
4. What is out there that can help the VA create a passive income opportunity?

You may probably add your own too.

If you can apply the above to your situation and your clients, you may already know someone who knows someone who has the specialist skills to help you to create and develop a product or service for your niche market.

Action:

Write a list about the challenges your clients have with the running of their business, perhaps that relates to skills they don't possess which would make a massive difference to what they can achieve in their own business.

Start thinking about technology or personal/business skills you may need to adopt to solve this list. Write a list of people you could connect with to solve these problems.

Perhaps your client is asking you to build a WordPress site and you don't know how to. Perhaps, as part of your networking strategy, you want to get to know people who build WordPress sites.

1. Identify the need;
2. Identify the solution;
3. Start listing people in your network or introductions you may need to find a strategic alliance to help you to deliver the solution

Sourcing a Strategic Partner

It doesn't mean that the first person you meet who builds WordPress sites will be your strategic partner. You do need to get to know them, like them and trust them first. You should see examples of their work, ask other people what their impressions are and ask for case studies. If need be, look for opportunities where you can see them in action. I have had people attend my training before they felt they could then go on to authentically promote it. People have seen me present before asking me to present at their own events.

You must be extremely careful to ensure that anybody you work with has a good reputation. It doesn't matter if they are just starting out because you might just be starting out as well, but the end result of their work will reflect on your business. That is why I only recommend people that I know, like and trust. I have to know that they are going to do a good job because if I get it wrong, and I have got it wrong in the past, it gives a bad impression of my judgment and my network might be less likely to want to work with me or ask for my recommendations.

Look for those connectors, look for people who also work with your niche market and see where there could be a connection either now or in the future.

Investigate who is already in your network, both online and offline contacts. I mentioned in previous sections about building relationships and investing time to have one-to-one meetings or calls with your network. This could be meeting for a coffee or meeting prior to the start of a networking meeting. This is why you should track your networking activities. Never see this as a waste of time, as any which way you invest time in building a relationship will be an invaluable one. Yes, you may state that you need to be in the office to provide your clients with support; however, you must remember that first and foremost you are a business owner and that investing time in your marketing is a must. Your clients should understand that.

If need be, it might be that you ask for a referral from your network, asking for people with particular skills or experience. Be very clear about what you are looking for and why. If you are clear about what you are looking for, the right contact is likely to be connected to you.

Online or Offline Connections?

I have met people from my online networking and in some cases we have never met, however, I do like to meet people in person and will make the effort to travel to do so. If I cannot meet someone face-to-face for whatever reason, I will endeavor to meet them via Skype or Zoom as I believe there is a certain energy you pick up about people that you don't always get when you just speak on the phone. Social networking is fabulous because you get to meet people who, because of location, you may never have had the opportunity to meet. Your circle widens quite considerably.

Networking online is just as important as face-to-face networking.

People in my online network have also referred me on to people they considered as a great contact for me and, because I fully trusted some of those people's judgment, I actually started the ball rolling on a project before meeting with that person. Although, I did get to know them first and ensured that they were a great fit for my business and vice versa. And, over time, I did get to meet them which further cemented the relationship.

I would also recommend sourcing people who also work with your niche market, as they will already have contacts who you could be connected to and vice versa. I would also research (socially stalk!) people online and look to see if they are connected to any of your existing contacts already, so that you could ask for an opinion on that person as well as an introduction.

Who Will Benefit?

It really doesn't matter if you are just starting out as a VA because you will still be building your own network of contacts both on and offline. In addition, you will be building up your client base and your clients will form part of your network as indeed their network will become part of your network at some point too.

Therefore, it could be that you both agree that when they come into contact with someone who requires the service each of you provides, you would have an exclusive introduction process. If the introduction led to business, the strategic partner would receive a referral fee.

It could be that you actively promote each other's services via online marketing, to include you guest blogging, tweeting and writing in newsletters for one another, therefore providing exposure to one another's database.

It could be that you put on training courses or events, and your role is to promote the event to your database and conduct the marketing activity, whilst they deliver the training and you share the profits. The training course could be based on a need your clients or local business community have a need for i.e. social media training or how to brand their business. In short, what you are doing is bringing the right expert to the audience.

It could be that there is a great product out there which you know will benefit your client and the way you both work together. You could earn what's called an 'affiliate fee' or earn a discount for each month the client is using the product.

Either way, be clear what you are both bringing to the relationship, how it will work, who will manage the process, how you will make decisions and how you will both benefit financially if there is money involved.

When you are networking for your business, you will reach a certain amount of people. When you are networking online, you will reach a wider audience.

When you create a strategic alliance with someone who in turn promotes you, you are reaching a far wider and extensive audience based on people you may never have connected with through your own networking. Your exposure can significantly increase. Even if this doesn't bring you an income immediately, it is likely that it will raise your profile in line with the person you are a strategic partner with. If they already have a great reputation and a following to match, people will start to accept you as someone to also follow. People build trust in you if your strategic partner is putting their neck out to promote you.

Action:

Create a clear outline of the outcome you would like to achieve from a strategic alliance including outcomes relating to your profile and finances.

Start to capture how you can build this into your business - ensure you include it as part of your Business Plan.

Creating an Agreement

Whatever form of agreement you wish to take, whether it is an email or a contract, be very clear right from the start what you are both expecting from this relationship. Never make any assumptions and never keep it to just a verbal agreement.

Clarify what outcomes you are expecting from the relationship and what outcomes you are expecting from the joint product or service.

It could be an outcome which would affect the business profile of your business or that of your strategic partner or it could be connect with financial outcomes. State these clearly as it will help to work on the goals.

Become clear as to how you will work together, how and when you will communicate with one another. You also need to be clear how one should market the other or how you will jointly market a product or service you have jointly created.

Be clear on who will do what in the actions, as you may have a strength which is their weakness and vice versa. It's best if you are both working towards your strengths. Of course, this doesn't apply if it is a simple case of joint promotion.

You also must be clear on the financial arrangement, from how much should be charged, who will take the payments, to how much will be shared between you both.

Alternatively, if either one of you is earning an affiliate fee, it's important that this amount is clear and how often it will be paid.

Also form an agreement on boundaries and communication. Just like you would with a client you set boundaries in place on best practice to work with one another, in addition on how you will communicate if someone is not happy with the way the arrangement is going. There is nothing worse than harbouring feelings which will then affect the professionalism of the relationship. Be clear on how you will clear the air. We never want to upset people BUT it's far more damaging not saying anything at all.

Bear in mind that, over time, people and situations can change and the original plan may need to alter. Be clear on what would happen if either party wants to end the relationship and what would have to happen to allow the exit.

Ensure that you cover all angles before getting into any arrangement so that you feel happy with the way the relationship will be heading.

The Suzanne Dibble Legal Templates for VAs that I use in my training courses have an Associate agreement within them – if you need to get legal contracts, please contact me on Amanda@vact.co.uk and I will arrange a link for you to purchase them.

Action:

Note down the following to help establish the best person to work with:

1. What type of person are you when working, for instance? Are you a completer, finisher or an ideas person yet not the implementer, or are you an overview person or detailed? It may be worthwhile looking at a profile test such as Talent Dynamics which is a real eye opener in the way you work and communicate with others. I have a recommended supplier so please feel free to message me and I will connect you.
2. What are your preferred ways of communicating?
3. What level of accountability do you feel should be required from a strategic alliance?
4. What are the strengths that you could be bringing to the relationship?
5. What motivates you and what de-motivates you when working with someone?
6. What are your weaknesses?

Accountability

For me, it's important that I keep the flow of communication with my close strategic alliances constant. If I am running a product or service on a joint basis then I have a weekly or monthly update call with my partner to discuss marketing, ideas, client communication and any challenges.

If the alliance is with someone whose product or service I am promoting in exchange for an affiliate fee, where possible I will have a quarterly update call to refresh any marketing communication as well as to continue building the relationship. The same would relate to an alliance where it's a joint business promotion.

Summary

- Identify the need you can spot from either your niche or general business market and then identify what the solution could be, whether it's a product or service.
- Based on your idea, research your network contacts and, where required, ask for introductions to people who may have the knowledge, skills and experience to help you create the solution.
- Make time to get to know people, establish their reputation and how that would affect your own if you were to work together. Invest in building the relationship first.
- Become clear on how each of you will benefit from the relationship and be clear on the outcomes you both want to achieve.
- Create a written agreement on the outcomes you want to aim towards, how you will work together, who will be responsible for what actions, how you will communicate and how often as well as how you will distribute the income.
- Be clear on what will happen if you need to end the relationship or change the way the relationship is working.