



Illustration by Martin Elfman

Development

Why Networking Is More Important Than Ever—and How to Do It Virtually

There are numerous ways to forge key professional connections, even when you're stuck at home

By Stefanie Waldek

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While [networking](#) is helpful in essentially every professional industry, it's particularly advantageous in creative fields like design, not only for meeting new clients but also for building a roster of peers who can be turned to for support or collaboration.

“As an entry-level individual, networking can help you connect with vendors and reps who will become a vital asset to you as you grow in your career and will share in your success,” says designer [Brynn Olson](#). “As the owner of my own firm, networking with

my fellow designers, architects, and builders has been an entrepreneurial lifeline for me throughout the years. Understanding we're all in this together, rather than competitors, has been a true blessing while feeling my way through the ins-and-outs of owning a business.”

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Of course, the pandemic has thrown a wrench into traditional networking tactics, such as attending conferences or [show houses](#). But the industry's recent pivot toward the virtual might not be such a bad thing for networking. “While it sounds sacrilegious to say, I find that online networking can actually outperform what happens when you put a bunch of people in a room and hope that they'll engage,” says professional meeting planner Lee Gimpel, founder of [Better Meetings](#). “A number of online conferencing platforms better allow people to know who's in the room and with whom they should connect, as well as keeping people moving and ensuring they're meeting new people not getting stuck in a corner talking to someone who's not helpful.”

Gimpel also points out that the virtual world removes geographical hurdles. “If you think the architectural scene in London is really interesting, nothing stops you from dropping in on an event there, the same with checking in on design gatherings in Johannesburg or Sydney,” he says. “You could actually form an inspiring, valuable, helpful cadre of colleagues around the world in a single evening.”

And beyond helping you to get to know your peers, networking during the pandemic can be good for business—and not just by introducing you to new clients. “I have pivoted from using networking to find clients to using it to find long-term referral partners and vendors that I may not be aware of,” says Jerith Bailey, senior designer at contractor [Mahogany Builders](#). “As craftsmen are heavily booked right now, networking allows me to broaden my little black book of business contacts for things like flooring, wallpaper installation, and even custom cabinetry. The solid network I've built has allowed me to take on even more work during this busy time.”

If the world of virtual networking is still a bit foreign to you, here are some expert tips for maximizing your presence online to build your professional connections.

Leverage your social media platforms

There's never been a more critical time to [boost your visibility online](#). “If you don't already have a strong presence on various platforms where people can find you, now

is a great time to start,” says Gioi Tran of [Applegate Tran Interiors](#). “Become easy to find on Google, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, or LinkedIn, and provide information about yourself and your brand.”

Once your accounts are optimized, be proactive with them, not only by posting your own content but also by interacting with others. “Spontaneous comments and replies start many interesting discussions,” says Rebeca Sena, an architectural marketing consultant at [Getspace.digital](#). “They may result in new partnerships or teach you how to deal with certain business-related [scenarios] like handling difficult clients or implementing new [design software](#).”

Create your own online group

Not feeling the social media world? Opt for creating your own little online group—perhaps a more private one for insider baseball-type discussions. “Invite people you know to a group conversation on Slack or Telegram to share your experiences, ideas, and skills,” says Sena. “Encourage your colleagues to add interested people they know and trust. It's amazing how quickly a small group chat can snowball to hundreds of involved members exchanging ideas and best practices.”

Take online classes

While some [online classes](#) on platforms like [Coursera](#) or [LinkedIn Learning](#) are just collections of videos for you to watch, others allow you to interact with your professors and your fellow students, which is a great way to build a network. “I’ve taken Zoom classes offered through Comm Collective, Schumacher, Sister Parish, *Designers Today*, and others,” says designer [Isabel Ladd](#). “I was an active participant during the calls, asking questions and giving feedback. One panel led me to connect with a photographer, and I was even offered a chance to participate in a call with a high-end furniture line to give feedback on product launches.”

Subscribe to industry newsletters

Need help finding out what kind of online programming is out there? Tap into the knowledge banks of industry publications. “It is so important to sign up for the newsletters of design sites and magazines, so you are in the loop on the many virtual panels and programming that are happening online and on Instagram, and the conversations that are starting to develop on Clubhouse,” says designer [Kendall Wilkinson](#). “I also believe that print magazines are an essential tool to read about what is happening in design worldwide, so there isn’t a better time to renew those subscriptions!”

Seek out a mentor

Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it, especially from someone who might have different expertise than you. "You are never too young or old to have a mentor. It's very important to speak to someone who has experience in your industry who can help guide you through obstacles and offer advice," says Monae Redmond, director of member services at the [International Interior Design Association \(IIDA\)](#). "As the pandemic continues to break down geographic barriers, now is a better time than ever to find a mentor who is poised to help you grow in your career, regardless of your current location."

Engage in thought leadership by participating in panels or writing white papers

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Assert yourself as an authority in the field. "Participation in the conversation is key to staying relevant. This includes sitting on panels and being involved in boards and committees where the conversations are happening," says architect Michael Hsu. "Engaging in thought leadership when projects become more scarce keeps us top of mind and builds expert knowledge."

Early on during the pandemic, Hsu's firm, [Michael Hsu Office of Architecture \(MHOA\)](#), published a white paper about the future of experiential design in a post-COVID world. "The document was distributed to clients, friends, and media contacts with recommendations for strategic concepts and case studies outlining solutions for a variety of project types," he says. "The result has been thoughtful conversation with existing and potential clients as well as colleagues, and it continues to prove beneficial 12 months into the pandemic."

Just reach out

"It may sound simple, but it's important to remember that you do already have a network in place—big or small—and that you shouldn't hesitate to call on it," says designer [Michael Del Piero](#). "I am always happy to share resources or contacts with fellow designers who may be in need. If something is stumping me, I always think to my existing network and to who might have advice or a resource that may help."

And if you want to expand that network? "Don't be afraid to reach out to designers you admire," says Gioi Tran. "Setting up a virtual meeting or phone call could provide the insight you need and build a meaningful connection as well."

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