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According to the recently published results from the 2nd Annual Accounting Firm Operations and Technology (AFOT) survey, attracting new clients and communicating with existing ones challenges 47 percent of all accounting firms. As a

matter of fact, respondents ranked attracting new clients as the leading practice

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Equipped with this knowledge, a first step to determining how you attract new clients would be to assess what you are currently doing to gain referrals, network in the community, and ensure 1) you have a website and 2) that your website is current and frequently updated with fresh relevant content.

How to gain more referrals

Referrals most commonly happen when a happy customer is asked by someone who values their opinion for a recommendation of whom to use for accounting, tax or bookkeeping services. The problem with waiting for those referrals to stream in is they are often few and far between given the nature of the conversation that has to take place for your business name to come up.

To accelerate referrals you have to take a proactive approach. This is done by consistently giving your clients something to talk to their friends about. In order to consistently clients something to talk about without cutting into your billable work hours you will need to master efficient effective communication and deliver content they are motivated to share with colleagues and friends.

With every form of communication you will find unique challenges. Let's consider how communication using something as ubiquitous as email can present a challenge. Email is the most popular method of communication. Although email leads the list in communication methods it can require a lot of time to create, send and respond to – which makes it a challenge to manage. Additionally, the sheer volume of email we all manage on a weekly basis creates issues with keeping information organized and retaining what is needed to do our billable work.

Information is the most sought-after commodity. There are effective and proficient ways to communicate regularly with clients to encourage referrals. If you are sharing information-rich content that your clients' value there is a better chance they will talk about and perhaps pass along the content to their friends. When your clients

share your content their peers see them as brokers of the valuable commodity of

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communicating with clients and sharing valuable information on a regular basis is solved.

Network in the Community

Getting your name out in the community can be done through participating in various activities or by attending or sponsoring local events, chamber of commerce meetings, or by providing free educational seminars for small business owners, municipalities, or for individuals (e.g. Tax shelters, college savings plans, etc.). For example, if you do personal tax work, by offering a free tax seminar annually to the local police or fire department you will become the tax expert they look to for advice and likely give their business to. Or, if you provide accounting, tax or bookkeeping services for small businesses, speaking at a local or state small business event will place you in front of dozens or perhaps hundreds of prospective clients.

Another way to get your name out in the community is to find additional avenues to get your content published. You might form a relationship with a local newspaper or community news outlet that will take one article from you every month or quarter and publish it for their readership. This bolsters your profile and paints you as an expert in accounting, tax, bookkeeping and financial matters.

Website

Much like business cards or firm brochures, websites for accounting professionals are becoming mandatory. The challenge most accounting professionals have is finding the time to build, launch and manage a website.

Consider what it would be like if you could launch a website in 10 minutes and if the website updated automatically with fresh content on a regular basis. Based on the 2nd Annual AFOT survey research results, having your website automatically update with fresh content would eliminate a major practice management concern for over

35 percent of the accounting population. There are website builder service providers

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In closing, consider these factors when assessing a website service provider:

- How much does the site cost?
- How quickly can the site go live?
- Is the domain name included, or is there a fee for this?
- Can you use your existing domain name?
- How many email accounts are you allowed?
- Are there templates to customize the design?
- Can you customize text, pages, images, keywords and a secure members' area?
- Are there office management tools, including:
 - Client Sign-up
 - Client Management Services
 - Integrated Payment Gateway
 - Events Calendar
 - Google Map Service
 - Tax Organizer
 - Services Page
- Is there the ability to share information with clients, including:
 - Financial Calculator
 - Client Newsletters
 - Links
 - Additional pages

Bob Tenner is the General Partner of Tenenz, Inc. (www.tenenz.com). He has more than 19 years of experience successfully serving the marketing, communications and product needs of accounting and tax professionals. Tenenz, Inc., located in Minneapolis, MN, has provides high quality products and services to accounting

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