

# Value through long-term relationships

 By Jane Stevenson

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Relationships fuel business success. Business owners often get caught up in conversations around the details of what they sell rather than focusing on critical conversations around building relationships. This extends not only to clients but to suppliers, employees, and *\*gasp\** even our competitors.

We need solid, long-term relationships to carry us in challenging times. I believe in networking with other businesses to share ideas, thoughts and perspectives. People often fear speaking with other businesses or competitors in case they use the information inappropriately. The reality is, business relationships are like any other relationship: they require effort and must be mutually beneficial. We must be willing to give, share and support. So, how do we build stronger business relationships that will last?

## Give more than you receive

Cultivate relationships when you are NOT needing something. There is nothing worse than hearing from someone only to hear they need something. Take time to learn about their business, dreams, objectives, and provide opportunities to fulfil them whenever possible. People appreciate it when they realise you're looking out for them. This goes a long way in fostering trust.



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Be sincerely interested. Understand likes and interests, and forward relevant articles, links and other information that might be of use. I am always wonderfully surprised to receive a call or note with information that is relevant to me – especially when it comes from someone who doesn't operate in that space. It means they are thinking of me, and they have heard what my needs are, and care.

## Be honest

Building a first-class reputation is founded on honesty. As a business owner, it's important that people see you as an expert in your field. It is equally important to be honest when you don't know, and offer to find a solution. Authenticity and honesty are key drivers of trust, the single most important element in building relationships.

## Be accountable

Owning mistakes and correcting mishaps will carry you far. Often, people just want to know you acknowledge the mistake, to apologise, and that you have a plan for getting back on track. Never get involved in the blame game – it is sure to be a lose-lose outcome.

## It's always personal

In today's world, we are caught up in political correctness which often creates a false, impersonal front. If ever there was a time to be personal (professionally speaking), it is now. How often do you kid yourself into believing you are building a good relationship over email? Your email probably won't stand out in my inbox. But a personally written card landing on my desk gets my attention. So does a phone call.

Make a habit of thanking and acknowledging people. Never forget who got you where you are. You can never say thank you enough to clients, customers, colleagues or suppliers.

Finally, **be real**. It builds trust and respect.

## ABOUT JANE STEVENSON

Named by CEO publication as SA's most influential government businesswoman in the SME sector in 2012, she's big on vision, strategy and effective communication. Start with a successful business strategy and executive coaching consultancy to leading national brands... add the experience of being a Board and EXCO member of the Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber; and stir in some fearless Scottish roots and a dedication to building organisational vision. The result? A motivating, passionate team player.

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