

Small Players Dance with the Big Boys



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When Phil LaDuca popped a disc in his back after years as a professional Broadway dancer, choreographer & teacher, he was out of work, but not out of business. LaDuca hung up his own shoes to create a flexible dance shoe & invested \$40,000 of his own money to start LaDuca Shoes to sell the model.

NEW YORK POST

Six years after opening a store in Hell's Kitchen, he has custom made shoes for shows including "Hairspray," "Movin' Out" and "The Producers" and for TV and films starring Uma Thurman, Meryl Streep and Richard Gere. He's even outfitting Gwen Stefani with a pair for her upcoming tour and planning to open a store in LA. For LaDuca, landing large clients was all about mobilizing his industry contacts to put out word that while his product was radical, it was solid because he was personally committed to crafting it well. "The ingredient of love in the mix makes all the difference in the world," said LaDuca, whose company now employs 10 and brings in \$1 million each year.

Maximizing contacts is just one important step in landing major clients for a small business, said Ira Davidson, director of the New York Small Business Development Center at Pace University. Small business owners can overcome their unknown status by figuring out exactly who to target within a large corporation and fostering a long-term relationship with that individual through a personalized pitch.

That's one thing David Levin pitches potential new clients for his independent Web design and interactive/online marketing company i33 communications. Levin founded the company in 1995

and has since amassed clients including Redken and Star-wood Hotels. "Big agencies have become like body shops and you have to have a staff of 800 to fulfill client needs," said Levin.

Often, large corporations such as Coca-Cola carve out a certain percentage of their business for small businesses. Use the Web to find these companies, as well as organizations like the SBDC and the Chamber of Commerce who can help you develop a business plan and networking skills. And don't be afraid to get to know those competitors, small and large alike, to trade ideas and industry contacts. All of these strategies helped emergency-preparedness company Homeland Safety Inc. nab big clients including the city of New York after just a year in business.

The company, which prepares businesses and residences for natural and manmade emergencies, networks at lunchtime meeting groups such as Gotham City Networking, conducts workshops at trade shows, markets with postcards and pays commissions to employees within large organizations who lead to appropriate contacts, according to Bill Morelli, its director of business development.

"Find people with links in high places," Morelli advises. "Call at odd hours, get past the gatekeepers. Nothing is a substitute for an introduction; it gets so many barriers out of the way."

By Anne Becker