



# HOW TO REPAY A REFERRER WHEN YOU CAN'T REFER BACK

BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH

Referrals are the lifeblood of most professional services firms. And, as I've [mentioned before](#), the referral relationship is one of reciprocity. It's about keeping each other in the loop about how projects are going. It's about letting each other know where the client is at, what they're saying and even where other opportunities may lie. And, above all, it's about doing what you can to make sure your relationship is mutually beneficial - especially when it comes to sending work back to the person who's giving it to you.

The reality is, however, that's not always possible. Sometimes, we just don't have anything to send back to someone who keeps giving to us.

If you find yourself in that situation, there are still things that you can do to repay the favour and keep the relationship on something of an equal footing. Here are just some of them.

## 1. INVITE THEM TO SOMETHING

Possibly the easiest way to repay any referral is simply to invite the referrer along to something. Sure, it could be a professional development session that you're hosting or some other kind of training, but if you're going to go down that path at least make it valuable, relevant and interesting. (And make it easy for them to bring, or send, a buddy from their office).

Then again, I think it's even better if you can invite them to something they'll actually think is fun. Find out what they like doing in their spare time and arrange a social function that involves it. It could be a sailing day or a trip to a sporting event or a night at the theatre or opera. It could be anything really. Whatever it is, just make sure they're going to enjoy themselves and you're not, for instance, taking someone to a footy game when they've [never heard of Richmond](#).

Inviting someone to a snoozefest is a torture, not a favour.

## 2. INTRODUCE THEM TO SOMEONE

Better still, why not invite other people along too - people they actually would like to meet, who may be helpful to them in some way and who you think they'd get along with. This doesn't have to be a potential client. It could be anyone in your book of contacts who you think they'd hit it off with and who could enrich their life in some small way.

The introduction doesn't necessarily have to involve being at the same social function either. You could introduce them in any way you like. Just make sure they're going to be a valuable connection. If you waste their time with someone who's peripheral to what they do, you're not helping them at all.

## 3. GIVE AWAY SOMETHING TO MAKE THEM LOOK GOOD

I'm not talking here about greasing the palm with a wad of cash or bribing your way into work. I'm talking about giving away something of value that only you have the power to give.

For instance, when a firm introduces me to a contact I won't charge them for my first advice. I explicitly let them know that this is because of their relationship with the referrer. That way, it's not just the person who receives the free advice who benefits. The referrer also gets to look good and usually the client will go back to them and thanks them - cementing their relationship even further.

Think about how you could help your referrer by doing something similar. What do you have to give away?

#### **4. SHARE INFORMATION**

When you're in a referral relationship with someone, you're effectively in an alliance. And all great alliances are built - to some degree - on information sharing.

I'm not telling you to go out and spill confidential information or expose a client's deep dark secrets. But I am telling you to [let them know](#) all about what you do and how you both want to be positioned - and expecting the same from them.

I also think your information sharing mindset should extend to their posts and sharing them where you can. It should also involve passing their articles onto people who you know would be interested.

#### **5. SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT ON THEM**

When it comes to reciprocity with a referrer, I'm big on the shout out.

Whenever you promote a project you've worked on - whether that's through your internal channels or external ones - do what you can to let people know how and why you got the work in the first place. Give them a shout out and let them know how valuable your relationship with them is.

I believe the shout out should also extend to spreading the word about their achievements more generally. For instance, if your referrer wins an award and you're in a LinkedIn Group where that's relevant, post about it. If you're in a big firm where people may not know about their win, spread the word. And, if you have a regular newsletter you send out to clients, why not even tell them about it? (So long, of course, as your other clients won't be jealous or it won't create conflicts.)

#### **6. DON'T WAIT FOR THE TAP**

My final piece of advice is something you should never do, and it's this: never sit around and wait for the tap on the shoulder so that the referrer has to come and ask you what's going on. Referral relationships are all about being proactive and, if you have no work to give in return, being proactive becomes more important than ever.

So stay on the front foot and keep your referrer in the loop. If you're scratching your head about and wondering how and why, why not just go ahead and pick up the phone to one. Ask them how they're going, tell them how your relationship with the client is faring and then see whether there's any one of the five things above you could do to help them out.

Sometimes, simply letting them know how they're helping you will be reward enough.

## FURTHER READING

Sue-Ella's articles:

[How To Get Someone To Introduce Their Clients To You](#)

[How Does The Referral Relationship Work?](#)

## WANT MORE?

If you'd like help with building the skills and smarts of your team email [Sue-Ella](#) or [get in touch](#).



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