

This is an edited transcript of the June 11, 2014 SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast interview titled: [Thom Singer on How to Expand Your Professional Network and Develop New Business.](#)

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving for small business success? There is help. Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host.

My guest on the podcast today is [Thom Singer](#). Thom has more than 23 years of sales and marketing experience with professional services firms such as RR Donnelley, Marsh Inc., and Wells Fargo.

Thom has been a self-employed speaker, trainer, and consultant since 2005. He's a well-known expert in branding, positioning, and networking and has trained thousands of people, including entrepreneurs like us, in the art of building professional contacts that lead to increased business.

Thom is also the author of ten books on the power of business relationships, business development, entrepreneurship, and presentation skills. He speaks regularly at business and association conferences around the United States and beyond and has presented to over 350 audiences during his career as a speaker.

If you're striving to build a deeper, lasting base of client and business relationships and develop more new business, then you don't want to miss the information that Thom is going to be sharing with us today.

Thanks for making the time to be here, Thom.

Thom Singer: Thank you, Stephen, for having me.

Stephen Lahey: You were first on the podcast over a year ago, I believe, so it's been a while and there are lots of new listeners that have come onboard. Why don't we start out with your backstory. What were

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you up to prior to launching your own company and what prompted you to take the leap?

Thom Singer: Sure. I was a sales and marketing professional. I worked for large companies. I was also the business development and marketing director for a couple of law firms and a consulting firm.

I always enjoyed attending conferences, learning from great speakers. Of course, there were also good speakers, and maybe a few who weren't so wonderful. But I loved hearing the ones how were great. I always thought it would be fun if you could do that for a living.

I would talk with them after their speeches about how do you get into the speaking profession. I studied it, and I was pursuing learning how to become a trainer and a speaker. But what really changed was the recession. In 2009, I was part of a large layoff at a company I worked for and there were no jobs. So I had to do something, and so I decided to give speaking a go. While it was by no means easy and I joke that I sort of hemorrhaged cash for a couple of years, we actually turned the corner and turned it into a business that supports our family.

Stephen Lahey: As I've come to know you and your work, one of the things that's obvious to me is your focus on building relationships – and more than that, significant, lasting relationships, and obviously helping business professionals and entrepreneurs like me to do the same thing. How did that actually become a focus for you, even a topic for keynotes and so on? How did it become your passion?

Thom Singer: I guess I have to give some of the credit to my parents. Growing up, my parents were friends, very close friends with people they had known their whole lives. My father was in his 50s when I was born and he lived until last year. He was 99 years old when he passed away. And while he had outlived most of his friends, through his whole life he had a big circle of friends but was always very close with people that he had been in the Boy Scouts with, for example. And my mother had similar types of relationships that stretched back to high school. I guess I've always believed that relationships should be long term because that's what I witnessed with my parents.

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When I got into the business community, the opportunities that came my way always came through building good relationships with people. I just naturally gravitate toward wanting relationships to be more than superficial because I can help other people and they can help me once we really know each other. So I think that it kind of came from watching how my parents lived their lives and then putting it into practice when I started my own adult career.

Stephen Lahey:

There's an old saying, in fact, I think it used to be—and this shows you how old I am—I think it was a poster in the 1970s that my mom had on the side of our refrigerator. It said “Children learn what they live.” and there was a poem that illustrated that. I think it's so true. Children absorb values. And we could probably talk about parenthood since both of us are parents, but I'm not sure how many listeners would click the off button if we got off-topic, so maybe another time.

You talk about a term that I think is meaningful and it's something really important to help people frame things if they're networking or if they're just developing relationships in their personal lives, you talk about “cooperative significance”. It's a very powerful idea. Can you tell us about that? Get us into the mindset of cooperative significance.

Thom Singer:

Sure, Stephen. I can pretend that I'm successful. I can fake that. I could wear an Armani suit, I could lease an \$80,000 Mercedes, I could wear a Rolex watch, and whether I had the money to pay for these things or not, I could put them on and walk around and people might say, wow, that guy's successful.

But you cannot fake significance because you don't get to decide that you're significant. There's not a significant hat that you get to put on or a certain type of cufflink that says, hey look, I'm significant.

So as I talk to people and work with people in my own career, everybody I talk to—and they use different words—but it really comes down to when I ask them what do they want, people always want to be significant, at home, at the office, in their community, in their faith community. People want to feel like they're worthy, that they make a difference. And as I said, you can't just walk up and say, by the way, I'm very significant to you. Other people make that determination, not you.

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So if we all want to feel significant, one of the first things I try to teach people is let the other people in your life who are significant to you, let them know it. Because if you let other people know they're significant, other people will come around and let you know the same thing. So it's leading by example in letting people know what they do that really touches you. And it's cooperative because if you let other people know, then people are going to let you know.

Stephen Lahey: I think it's quite rare to find people who go out of their way to let others know that they're appreciated, that they're significant. Not everybody even responds to it. I don't even think they know how to, at least initially. But it wears well over time, I'll say that.
[laughs]

Thom Singer: You're right. A lot of people don't know how to respond, but it does trigger them feeling good. I mean, there's no way you can tell somebody, wow, Stephen, you made a difference in my life when I listened to your podcast today, and not have you smile.

Stephen Lahey: I think in business people watch what you do over time. They watch how you treat them and other people, and that tells them what they need to know.

Thom Singer: I believe that you're exactly right that it's consistency over time. The other piece of that is authenticity. Because if you're just saying, hey, great job, so you can get attention, then that's not authentic.

A lot of people sort of stalk the celebrities on social media and they're hoping, oh, maybe they're going to discover me because I've commented on their blog, or whatever. They think maybe that's going to do it. But if it's just opportunistic, not authentic, then people will sniff out a fraud over time pretty easily. Just be who you are and put it out there and usually it will work out pretty well for you.

Stephen Lahey: I totally agree. And over the past year, Thom, I've noticed you've been communicating with people about some of the new things you're doing, and I thought we would talk about that on the podcast today because I think that a lot of people get stuck in the comfort zone in their business and even if they're not getting the results that they used to, they sort of stick with that and that's a

problem. But I've noticed that you've developed a lot of new business outside of your core speaking business. So, from a strategic perspective, has providing new services, like sales training, for example, become more important to meeting the needs of your clients? Or how did that evolve?

Thom Singer:

I'd love to tell you that I'm really strategic and I can read markets better than all of my competitors. The reality is that I would give a speech and someone would come up and say, wow, that's fantastic, could you turn that into a three-hour seminar for my employees? I don't need a keynote speech, I need that same message turned into a training workshop.

And a lot of why I developed this kind of new business had to do with the fact that I'm a small business person, I'm supporting a family, and I have a daughter getting ready to go to college in about a year. The answer just has to be yes, if it's within the authenticity of what I can do. I had to find new ways to be able to deliver value.

And the other thing is that as a speaker I travel a lot, whereas there are a lot of training business opportunities within 100 miles of where I live. So I can do a training class for lots of companies, but the speaking comes around conferences and conferences happen to be held wherever that association or that company is going to have them. So it's hard to market to conferences just in my area around Austin, Texas, or San Antonio. But those are two really good size cities that have a lot of corporations that I can market to – to deliver training, coaching and consulting directly to them.

So it's kind of an addition. I'm not getting away from my main business, which is the "Conference Catalyst" – the speaking that I do at conferences. However, in addition to that it's being able to fill in so that I can continue to grow the business.

Stephen Lahey:

That approach can be so beneficial. Even more beneficial than we might think when we first go down those new paths that are maybe not in the center, in the core, of what we've been doing. We can deepen our relationship with our current clients by providing more services, etc.

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A lot of times, I think, Thom, we work with clients, and whether we're speaking for them at an event or whatever, they sort of judge how easy we are to work with, in other words, is the chemistry right. I think that "fit" is so important if you're talking about training, consulting, speaking. Providing more services can deepen our relationship even further with those clients and lead to more speaking, more training, more consulting because they trust us even more.

But this approach also diversifies what we provide in a way that protects our business. For example, for you, certain types of speaking gigs may dry up during a really tough economic time or companies may go on a stint where they're just looking for the huge-name, ultra-celebrity Tony Robbins types of speakers, or whomever. So I think that helps protect us if we diversify when change happens.

I think it also extends our skill set. It sort of extends our brand. And these are all reasons why I think it's so important, but it's a little scary. As an entrepreneur, what are your thoughts on purposefully broadening what we do in terms of our service offerings? How we should approach that?

Thom Singer:

Well, I think that you don't want to be throwing darts blindly into the dark just hoping you're going to hit the bull's eye. You need to give it a little bit of thought first. In my case, there are certain topics that lend themselves very well to my experience and there are other topics that really don't. Someone called me recently, and they had spoken to someone in an association and they had seen me speak. They were really excited about me, and they passed me on to the people who were involved with a committee and they said, oh, we heard you're a fantastic opening speaker. And I said, well, thank you. And they said you're totally what we want, but we don't want you to touch at all on networking or social media.

Now, my opening keynote usually revolves around those two topics, and I said, well, what are you looking for? And she said we just want leadership, 100%, we want 90 minutes on leadership. I do some leadership training, but a 90 minute keynote on leadership, that's just not my forte. I had to tell them I'm not the right fit even though they were calling to hire me. I didn't feel it was the right fit because authenticity-wise. Authentically, I could

not go and do a 90 minute leadership talk. Of course, I could have gone and read a couple of books and gone to the courseware that I use, third-party courseware that I use to teach leadership courses inside companies, and I could have molded that into a speech and a keynote, and then done it just to get the check. But I'm not a leadership expert. I touch on leadership. I train leaders. But for what they were looking for, there are great people out there who would knock the socks off their audience, and I would rather refer other speakers to them, or let them find one on their own, rather than try to do something that doesn't fit.

So my answer to your question really is, yes, you should look for other things you can do, but it has to fit with your company, with your plan, with what you're trying to accomplish. Otherwise, you're doing too many different things that are unrelated. You know, there's an old expression, if you chase two pigs, you can't catch one. I think that many people do that in their businesses. It's kind of like they're a painter, they're an auto mechanic, and they're a barber, and none of those businesses go anywhere because they're chasing too many pigs.

Stephen Lahey: Here's what I see from the outside looking in when I look at what you're doing, Thom. Keynote speaking is at the core of what you enjoy doing and what you do well, especially at meetings where it's going to be important for people who want to get value out of coming to a business conference, for example, to actually get to know each other and develop relationships, not just hear a few speakers and feel entertained.

Outside of that though, your background lends itself to teaching sales and marketing with professional services firms in mind, particularly law firms because you worked in that field.

Thom Singer: Right.

Stephen Lahey: So, how you would go about developing new business, specifically training or consulting business, within 100 miles of your home base, as you mentioned earlier. How have you been developing that side of the business?

Thom Singer: Well, I wish I could tell you I know and that I'm just knocking the socks off of everything I'm trying. I'd love to say I'm just printing money.

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Stephen Lahey: No, but what are you trying, and what are you discovering? Developing new business with new services is scary for people and I think it takes courage to try some new things. It's just not a comfortable feeling and that's why so many self-employed people veer away from it. They never do it, they never diversify, and so they miss out.

Thom Singer: For me, as I'm launching into doing these other products, these training products and such, for me, I'm going back to what I know and that means going back to developing relationships with people. I have a new program, it's third-party courseware that is a team building course. And as I've been getting certified to be a trainer for it, one of the things I've learned in this team building course is that it's really just networking within a company. It's getting your team to communicate in the same ways internally that I would teach people to communicate with people outside in their community.

So it's totally authentic for me to do this team building course because it's the exact same topic that I've been teaching for years with a different twist. However, selling this into a company and saying, yes, I have these assessments to get your team really fired up and it's based on Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and it's coursework put out by Wiley. Well, these are all great things, but I don't really know how to sell that yet.

I've been selling to generate speaking business and conference business for a long time. So, I understand how decisions are made and what the timelines are there, but I really don't understand the training side all that much yet because I'm still new to it.

One of the things I've done to make progress is I've looked at my network and I've chosen 50 people whom I admire – and I've just asked them if we could go out for coffee. And I've talked to them about this new team building program, and I've asked them how they would approach the business community. So I'm not trying to sell them or their companies, although what has happened is that several of them have talked about bringing me into their companies, and several of them have referred me to some of their clients who are looking for this type of program. They said, oh, we have a client who is looking for a team building exercise for their employee retreat. So by going out to my network and chatting,

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asking their advice and listening to them, I'm actually finding business and I'm also learning new ways to do it.

Another thing is I look at the people who are out there making their living. One of the reasons I've been somewhat successful in the speaking business is that I joined the National Speakers Association six years ago and I got very involved in building relationships with people who are maybe one or two steps above me on the ladder. We've become friends and we share best practice ideas and we share referrals and that has led me to understanding how the speaking business works.

So the same thing is true for the training business, I recently got involved with the American Society of Training and Development or ASTD. Now, I've just gone to one meeting because I just got involved, but my hope is on a local level, maybe on a national level, I can make some friends in that organization. I can bring value to them but they also can bring value to me and I can learn. So I think that the way to do it is find out who's doing it already. Because if you know people who are doing it, then you know you can learn to do it, too.

Stephen Lahey:

I think of it this way. You're playing to a strength that you have, and it's a strength that's been built up perhaps over a lifetime based on a set of values. We talked about the importance of relationships and you said that goes back to your mom and dad. So, over your lifetime, you've honed that ability and it happened more or less organically.

It was centered around a set of beliefs, a set of values about what's important. I think that's something that people need to look at when they're developing new business. We need to ask ourselves – what are my core values?

I'll tell you what mine are. I want to help people. I believe, for example, that if a company fits the profile of the type of company with the type of challenges that I serve best, that they're not going to find another professional out there that cares more about doing a really good quality job. I say that partially because in my particular field, executive search and recruiting, well, people are very mercenary. Many are focused on where's the, quote, unquote, easy money. If it's not there then they're moving on to the next client. And you might say, well, that's terrible, why be in

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a field like that? Well, I can tell you one of the reasons why, because it makes it really easy to stand out. [laughs]

And one of the things that you can focus on from the standpoint of the new business that you'll be developing through your new association, ASTD, is the simple fact that it's actually pretty easy to stand out by just being that caring person who's a giver, who works hard to help other people and the organization.

Over time that pays off. But some might say, well, why be involved with ASTD if most people are not givers there the way that they were at blankety-blank association? Well, of course there are some givers there, I'm sure. And you can join them and become one of the few that stand out, not the many who don't.

Thom Singer:

What I've discovered is everywhere you go there are givers and takers and you just have to develop a good sixth sense as to being able to identify them because there are people out there who you'll work really hard to build a friendship with, to build a business relationship with, but then they'll turn on you later, or they just may not really care. It's great if you've got referrals for them, but they're not going to think about you later.

And Maya Angelou has a great quote, and you know she passed away recently, and on Facebook and Twitter there have been 400 billion Maya Angelou quotes, but one really stood out to me and that was—and I'm going to paraphrase it here off the top of my head—was don't make someone a priority who treats you like an option. Those, to me, are strong words about your network.

But don't turn off on the whole idea of networking and joining associations just because there are some takers out there. Realize that givers are out there, too. There are people out there who will treat you like a priority, so go out and find them.

Stephen Lahey:

I totally agree. And there's the 80/20 rule, which I've found isn't exactly 80/20 in terms of givers to takers.

Thom Singer:

It might be 90/10.

Stephen Lahey:

It might be 90/10. [laughs] But whatever it is, if you just realize that that's just part of life, then that actually helps a lot. And, yes, a lot of people can do well in business, and they can make a lot of

money, and just be takers. We might want to say, oh, you have to be a giver to be successful. Well, technically, no, you don't.

But, in my opinion, business and life is more about who you become, not as much just what you get. And you can also be very successful being a giver, and then I think you're setting the right example for your kids, in the same way that your parents set the right example for you.

I think that's one of the things we need to look at when we're considering new business development. What kind of people do we want to be?

Thom Singer:

I think you're right. And the other thing we have to remember is that we're all human. We all make mistakes. So when someone stumbles and treats you poorly, well, we've all done that to somebody. It's not that we're a bad person or that we're just a taker. People have bad days. I always tell people that when you're dealing with humans, always the person on the other side of that relationship has their own stuff. You know what stuff is. It's the good stuff that goes on at home and the bad stuff that goes on at home and it's what happened when we were children, it's what happened in college. We all carry our stuff with us. We don't wear it out on the front, but we all have it.

I had a situation where somebody was basically telling me that I was wrong in a certain situation. That I had done something wrong that they disagreed with. Well, that wasn't my intent, and I was sort of down on myself because this person had let it known that they didn't think I was "all that and a bag of chips" anymore. But then another friend wrote me a letter and said – I just needed to thank you because you've been the one constant in my life for the past 30 years who's always been there to help me. Those two things happened within about 24 hours of each other and I was asking myself, well, which one is it? And to some extent, the answer for all of us is that it's both – because we're all going to make mistakes. We're all going to stumble. But it's when you put it on a scale over a lifetime, how does it balance out?

So I was talking about my parents and how they had friends that I grew up around who had been their friends for decades because my parents were so much older when I was born, people who had been their friends for 40 years. This summer my family is going to

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go and spend a weekend with a gentleman and his wife and daughter who was my best friend in kindergarten and we're going to stay at their house.

He and I were friends all the way through high school and we actually were roommates for a year in college. We went to the same college. But we don't talk on the phone every day. We're not besty-besty friends, but we've kept in touch and we're both almost 50 years old and they invited us to come and join them in California at their house for a weekend and we're going to go and do it. And I thought I don't remember a day in my life where this guy wasn't my friend, and I was trying to explain that to my daughters. There's also going to be another friend joining us who has daughters the same age as our daughters, so the three families are going to spend the weekend together. And I told my kids, I said I've been friends with these people for literally 30 and 40 years or more and that's a long time.

And I hope many of my clients and many of my business friends, I hope for the next 20, 30 years of my career they will be part of my life as well because I just don't believe in recycling through people. I think people are more important than that.

Stephen Lahey: We all have different sets of values and I'm not trying to change anybody else's values, mainly because it's a losing battle. [laughs]

Thom Singer: You've got that right.

Stephen Lahey: It is. And what I am trying to say is that as you're out there developing new business, just ask yourself the question – who do I want to be – and then be that person. Do the right thing on those terms. Nine times out of ten, if you're approaching things from that standpoint of I want to help you, not just I need your business, then things will work out.

So I guess just to wrap up, Thom, what parting words of advice do you have for professional service providers who are maybe a little bit scared to step outside of their comfort zone, and that maybe they rarely sit down with someone for coffee just for the sake of networking? What would you say to them? How do they start doing that? How do they step outside of their comfort zone?

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Thom Singer:

Well, I think, again, it has to be true to who you are. If you just don't believe in doing it but you're going to do it because someone on a podcast told you it's a good idea, then you're not going to be authentic and it's going to fall apart. But if you really believe, hey, all opportunities come from people and I want to be in a give and receive relationship with more people, then put yourself out there but start by being in the *give* relationship.

If you're out there trying to find people's challenges and connecting the dots where you can, people are going to notice that. If you're just walking up with a rehearsed elevator pitch showing up and going, hi, my name is Thom Singer, I've written ten books, I speak all over the country, blah, blah, blah, just verbal vomit all over them, that's what they're going to see.

Sadly, we're taught to meet people and recite something short and witty. That's been what's been taught in corporate America. So, A, a lot of people think that that's the way they're supposed to lead, and, B, we know we're there to get business for ourselves so we think we have to be aggressive, and, C, a lot of us when we get nervous or insecure we talk a lot. I have the same problem. So all these reasons cause us to just jump in and start telling everybody who we are and what we do well.

However, if we take a step back and remember the other person doesn't care about us yet, they care about them, and we ask questions. My favorite question, Stephen, to ask people is what's your biggest challenge. Some of them look at you and go – I don't know. Some of them have to think. But a lot of people, they'll just lay it out. What's your biggest challenge in business this year? They'll just tell you. And as soon as they tell you, nine out of ten times my answer is, wow, that's a big one, good luck, because I have no idea how to solve it. But one out of ten times, they tell me what their biggest challenge is and it's a softball coming right across the plate that we can just knock out of the park together because I can connect them to the person who can wipe that problem out. If I don't ask the question, I'll never know what their biggest challenge is.

So ask questions of people. Get into it. And train yourself to look for how you can put the dots together. If you do that and just appreciate the fact that you referred somebody and they got paid because you referred them, take pride in that. Don't think, well,

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how come I don't get a referral fee, or, when are they going to refer me something? Take your pride in, hey, I put those two people together and they merged their companies, or, I put those two people together and he hired her, or whatever it is, take pride in that and do it again and again and again and all of a sudden there's going to be a whole army of people saying I want some of what he or she has. They're going to be finding ways to get into your world. And the way they get in is that they send you referrals.

Stephen Lahey: No doubt about it. I find what you're saying to be so encouraging.

Thom Singer: And you are genuinely such a nice guy. We kind of met through social media. You're one of the best retweeters and likers and forwarders and sharer of other people's information. Before I did your podcast, I didn't really know who you were. Now we're becoming friends and we interact more, but you do act from a place of genuineness in how you help others.

Stephen Lahey: Well, and you know what, who's going to stop me? [laughs]

Thom Singer: Oh my god, what a great line. I'm going to sort of steal that. Who's going to stop me from doing the right thing?

Stephen Lahey: Please do.

Thom Singer: That's good.

Stephen Lahey: No one can stop you or me from doing the right thing, and that's the way I look at it. Of course, it makes you feel good. If you're constantly doing the right thing, in line with your personal values, that's the way, I think, to really build self-esteem.

Thom Singer: That is—I'm going to use it. That's fantastic.

Stephen Lahey: You have just co-opted it. It is now trademarked by Thom Singer.

Thom Singer: I'll give you credit the first few times I use it. How's that?

Stephen Lahey: I insist. [laughs] Well, thank you so much, Thom, for joining me on the podcast again. I've loved this conversation.

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Thom Singer: Well, thank you so much for having me. I think that you do a great job with your show and I think your listeners are very lucky to have you.

Stephen Lahey: Well, thank you. And the same to you, Thom. And I'd encourage everyone listening to visit your website which is ThomSinger.com and get to know you a bit through your blog and the other things that you have to offer there.

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