

An Industry Built on Relationships

by Rob Kirkbride



It is often said that the commercial interiors industry is built on personal relationships. Companies that have strong relationships with dealers and reps tend to do well. People like working with people they like and trust.

The way we communicate is changing, especially on a generational level. Gen Z would rather speak by text while Baby Boomers would rather talk on the phone or exchange an email. Social media applications are a form of communication as well, but do they pack the same emotional power as a face-to-face meeting? If we know someone only on a social media platform, does that even count as a professional relationship?

So we consulted the experts — folks in the industry who have built careers out of their deep connections. We asked them about the importance of personal business relationships. And we asked them about how those relationships are changing.

One thing is clear: Whether they are in leadership, sales, marketing or design, relationships still matter a lot in this industry. And a personal connection is often the difference between making a sale and losing it to a competitor. When the products sold by many companies are so similar, the differentiator could come down to personal relationships.

“Things like remembering the name of a business contact’s child (and asking about them) or knowing what their favorite Starbucks’ drink is has tipped business in my favor,” said **Mike Kelley, an industry veteran who is executive vice president at Bold Furniture** and has worked at Enwork, Knoll and Izzy+. “I have sold projects to major tech companies on the West Coast because I cared enough to get to know the people I was working with. I guess I just like working with different people and getting to know them. It helps.”

Don’t just take Mike’s word for it. A host of statistics prove that businesses run on relationship building. Here are a few to consider:

Building relationships saves money.

Acquiring a new customer can cost up to five times more than retaining an existing one. The probability of selling to an existing customer is 60-70%, in contrast to a 5-20% probability of selling to a new prospect, according to Marketing Metrics.

Relationships can help you boost profits.

According to Harvard Business Review, increasing customer retention rates by 5% can result in a profit increase ranging from 25% to 95%. Increasing

customer retention rates by 2% can create the same results as slashing costs by 10%, according to “Leading on the Edge of Chaos” by Emmet Murphy and Mark Murphy.

Loyalty boosts sales.

Loyal customers, on average, spend 67% more than new customers, according to Bain & Company. Existing customers also exhibit a higher inclination to explore new products compared to new customers. 92% of customers trust recommendations from people they know, making satisfied customers your best promoters.

Customer experience matters a lot.

86% of customers are willing to pay more for a superior customer experience. And 73% of customers are loyal to a brand because of its helpful customer service.



Mike Kelley

Brandi Susewitz is CEO and founder of RESEAT, a company that helps enterprises save time, reduce costs, and minimize waste by keeping furniture in circulation through proactive planning and combining an intuitive inventory management, a nationwide resale marketplace, and a network of mission-driven furniture dealers nationwide to make sustainable reuse seamless and scalable. She called the commercial interiors industry “one big, small industry” that is definitely a relationship-based business. That can be challenging if you aren’t naturally gifted at staying connected and networking.

“It may surprise a lot of people, but building relationships hasn’t always come easy to me,” she said. “I’ve always been a pretty shy person — quiet at first, and then I open up once I get to know someone. Early in my career, a friend and mentor in the furniture industry, Leonard Alvarado, gave me a book that had a huge impact: “Never Eat Alone” by Keith Ferrazzi. It completely changed how I thought about networking and building connections. It showed me that relationship-building is absolutely a skill you can learn if you’re willing to put in the

effort. For me, it didn’t come naturally, I’ve had to be intentional and work at it.”

While Susewitz had to overcome her shyness to build business relationships, it came more naturally for **Stephen Viscusi, CEO of The Viscusi Group**, a recruiting firm that focuses primarily on the commercial interiors industry.

“I learned from my mother,” he said. “My mom had lots of friends and she came from a large Italian family, meaning we had a lot of relatives always around. I also feel like I have a great sense of humor. I became gregarious at a young age, and loved talking to people, often too much so. I build relationships by being authentic, sharing my personal story with people and usually it makes them feel welcome in return. And I love doing that over a meal. I’m not sure it’s teachable, some people are just not as social as others and are more introverted. Everyone has different skills, there is no right or wrong.”

While relationship building happens in every industry, it seems to be pronounced in commercial interiors. **Larry Leete, general manager of KiSP Software Solutions**, has been in and out of the industry four times

throughout his career. Furniture is relational, he said, and the relationships are built out of the very things that the industry sells, markets and makes. Furniture is a commodity that is based in, and on, emotion. One of the main aspects of design is to evoke “feelings;” the furniture itself is tactile, it needs to be touched, sat-in and interacted with. That type of interaction requires a deeper connection to the people who are involved in it — a more human-based approach — in the day to day that takes place.

“That doesn’t happen in telecom or technology-centered industries,” said Leete, about the other industries he has worked in. “In those industries, it’s more a transactional approach to things, a feature/benefit ratio impact, and the human element really doesn’t come in to play. Also, there’s a lot of moral ambiguities in these industries that pushes out the relational aspect — I’ve got to close the deal and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to do it. I left telecom after 5 years of building in that space, and the cut-throat nature and ‘win at all costs’ approach to things is a lot different than it is in contract furniture.”



Brandi Susewitz



Stephen Viscusi



Larry Leete

For **Mike Wagner, CEO of the Jasper Group**, relationships are a way to build trust.

“At a first principal level, the trust is what we all broker,” he said. “Because our industry is a fragmented eco-system, trusting relationships are more critical when compared to more streamlined and consolidated industries like automotive as an example. Everything I have earned from our industry is attributed to the compounding effects of high trust relationships. These form slowly over years and accumulate. When you know someone cares deeply about your success and they are high trust, you want to be part of their network. These groups of people tend to stick together, and success just follows.”

The complexity of the commercial interiors industry almost makes building personal relationships with clients a necessity, said Peter Allen, director of strategic accounts at One Workplace.

“What makes it especially distinct is the fluid nature of workplace projects. Whether it’s a new build, a refurbishment, a cultural redesign, or a response to evolving business drivers, each scenario requires tailored solutions and close coordination. The

relationships we build help bridge those complexities. They ensure alignment, reduce friction and ultimately lead to better outcomes for the client,” he said. “In this environment, relationships are not just beneficial—they’re the foundation upon which successful projects are built.”

Jolene Levin has spent her career as a champion for students and designing classrooms that help learning and child development. In the education market, it’s never about just selling furniture, she said.

“You’re partnering in a district’s vision for learning. Trust grows when you consistently show up as both a knowledgeable expert and a caring



Jolene Levin

ally. Whether you’re sharing the latest research on acoustic design or simply asking a principal how their week is going, those moments prove you understand their world and are invested in student success,” said Levin “I’ve seen districts stick with us — even when lower bids appeared — because our deep expertise and ongoing empathy built a bond they valued. By immersing ourselves in their goals, classrooms and challenges, they knew we weren’t just vendors but true collaborators.”

For salespeople like **Hal Breier, an account executive for One Workplace** in Seattle, said relationship building is about building one’s personal brand. As a young salesperson at Owens-Illinois, he quipped to his mentor that he knew the adage “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” and he corrected him. “No Hal, it’s who knows you — the other way around. You want them to call you. Be the cat and not the dog.”

Throughout his long career, Breier has many examples of his relationships directly leading to project wins. Here’s an example:

“I started in this industry in L.A. in 1984 and was transferred to Seattle in 1990. I worked with a young project



Mike Wagner



Hal Breier

manager who had her own company on a medical project in Tacoma and won it. Months later, I got an invitation to bid on another project from her and competed for that piece of business. I won that too. Later, she joined a very prestigious project management company and became a partner. In 2002, I won a \$6 million law firm with her before she took early retirement to be a stay-at-home mom. Later, her old firm moved, and they asked me to furnish it. In 2009, that pm company was doing (a charitable foundation project). I won that \$17 million project. I always had strong competition, and won all the projects on my own merit, but I later ran into Laura accidentally walking down a Seattle street. We had a cup of coffee. She confessed to me that I was her favorite. Keep in mind in that timeframe I first met her working for Kimball, then was working for COI (the

Knoll dealer), and then BarclayDean (the Steelcase dealer). It wasn't my brand that got me there; it was me (I was the brand)."

Building relationships are easier for some than for others. **Kevin Budelmann, president of PeopleDesign**, said relationships have been a key to his achievements. Starting his career at Herman Miller led him to the contract furniture industry, where he met many people he's still in contact with today. He's participated in many industry groups, where volunteering and board membership led to other boards, which helped him grow personally and professionally. And yet:

"I'm an introvert. In hindsight, it took me too long to appreciate the value of connecting and getting to know people. I suggest starting sooner and asking for less. I understand now that

getting to know people and genuinely trying to help always helps me grow personally and comes back in spades professionally."



Kevin Budelmann



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Michelle Warren, founder and president of Catalyst Consulting Group, said that as an introvert, she never focused on building relationships to help her career. Still, she said her company was built on relationships nonetheless.

“My first customer was VIA seating. Chas Hepler and Nora Fenlon were friends before they were customers. My second customer was a friend of a friend,” she said.

How we communicate and connect with people is changing as fast as technology. Technology and social media helps us connect more quickly, but some argue that it is less personal. Technology and social media have made it both easier and harder to build meaningful professional relationships, said Susewitz.

“On one hand, it’s great, I can meet with so many more people virtually without the need to travel, which saves time and expands access. On the other hand, I do miss the in-person connection that comes from sitting across the table from someone. There’s a certain energy

and trust that builds more naturally face-to-face. The world is changing quickly, and in my experience, most people now prefer virtual meetings. It works but it does take more intention to build genuine relationships in a digital space,” she said.

Platforms like LinkedIn, Zoom, and Teams have created instant access, especially in a post-pandemic world where remote and hybrid working are now the norm. But while access has increased, the depth and quality of those connections can be much harder to establish, said **Peter Allen, director of strategic accounts at One Workplace**.

Meaningful relationships are built through human interaction, he said. And there’s no real substitute for face-to-face engagement. Body language, eye contact, tone, and the informal cues we pick up in person all play a critical role in forming trust and understanding. Those are far harder to replicate over a screen, particularly when cameras are off or engagement is half-hearted.

“Social media allows for convenience-based connections,” said Allen. “You can request or accept a connection with a single click, but often those digital relationships remain superficial unless there’s a deliberate effort to turn them into something more. You miss out on the spontaneous interactions — a chance introduction in an office, a conversation over coffee, being introduced to someone in the hallway — that so often lead to meaningful partnerships. In truth, many of the professional relationships we maintain today via virtual tools were first built in person, before the pandemic shifted how we work. And while we’ve all adapted to this new normal, I still believe the most meaningful and lasting relationships are those that begin or are nurtured in person.”

As a group, these professionals all pointed back to three things that are critical for forming and keeping relationships strong: Be sincere. Be real. Help others out if you can. ■



Michelle Warren



Peter Allen