



# Boost Your Networking Game in 2019

By Brett Gerrish • MMA

Bekum President & COO Steve London and Bekum Vice President of Sales Gary Carr in front of a Bekum machine at the NPE 2018 for the International plastics exhibition last May in Orlando FL.

photo credit: Michael A. Marcotte, *Plastics News*

**R**unning a business can feel like a constant battle between addressing the challenges of today and planning for the challenges of tomorrow. For manufacturers, this becomes a balancing act of time and resources. Future issues are just that; issues to worry about in the future. It's about preparing for a problem that may not exist yet, developing strategies to attract talent that is still learning, and working toward a goal that remains a far-away dream. By comparison, today's issues are always front-and-center. It's the first problem to hit you walking in the door and the last thing you think about when you head home.

Today's issues can be overwhelming and force manufacturing leaders to be so laser-focused on what's happening now that they lack the time to plan for what's down the road.

Successful manufacturers should work to bring balance to these two mindsets. Succeed today but always be planning for the future.

"Manufacturers can easily become lost in the day-to-day operations of their facility and the smaller your business is, and the more every decision requires your input, the more difficult it becomes to have that

strategic, future-focused mentality all good leaders need," said Chuck Hadden, MMA president & CEO. "It's important to maximize your energy when and where you can to begin thinking and strategizing for your company's future."

Networking is an often-underutilized skill that all current and emerging leaders should apply to their routine. Sometimes it can feel tedious or the ROI may seem to be lacking but, in almost all cases, those leaders who regularly network can look back, many times years later, at individual moments as *essential* to their brand's success.

"The positive effect networking can have on a company can be measured with the number of times you need or search out advice or help beyond your walls," suggested Phil Sponsler, president of Jackson's Orbitform and the 2017 John G. Thodis Michigan Manufacturer of the Year Award recipient. "Participating in and being able to rely on a strong network of thought leaders in manufacturing, sales, marketing, engineering or any discipline can be the difference between growing your business or closing it all down."

What's the right way to network? How do you get the most out of it? Some of Michigan's leading manufacturers shared their simple strategies for success.

## Remember to Give, Give, Give

When you walk into an event, the natural instinct is to get as much out of it for you as possible and that includes how you approach networking. *Fight that instinct!* One of the best strategies for effective networking is to be a giver rather than a taker.

"Effective industry networking requires some 'give and take.' If you only take, your networking contacts will tire of the one-way information exchange and ultimately resist sharing their insights," said Gary Carr, vice president of sales for the Williamston-based Bekum America. "It may feel strange, but resist trying to sell yourself and/or your company when networking. Share your knowledge of the issues, share your experiences and, most importantly, listen."

Networking events can fly by quickly and it's important to remember that you aren't networking for a single moment or for a single resource, you are *relationship-building*. What you do during those brief networking opportunities can develop into long-term, reliable relationships you can turn to throughout your career. By becoming

a source of free advice and acting as a listening ear, you'll gain the trust of others who can help you and the challenges you face.

But do it honestly and do it for the greater good of helping the whole industry grow.

"The worst things you can do when trying to network is be phony or be a user," reminded Sponsler. "Anybody can sense when someone is just looking for what's in it for them. A lack of sincerity is the kiss of death when it comes to high value discussion. Everyone has had that conversation with someone who is constantly looking around the room for their next point of contact and it all begins to feel so fake."

Sponsler continued, adding that you'll get the most out of networking "when you remember to see the importance of every conversation, treat them all with respect and be genuine — the results of your next seemingly random conversation could be what changes your business forever."

## Where to Network and How?

Just as important as knowing what kind of networker you should be is understanding where and how to network. Your time is valuable and you do want to get the most out of every second you're away from your facility.

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— Phil Sponsler, Orbitform

The team at Bekum America has mastered the art of making the most out of networking with dedicated salespeople traveling to meet potential new partners as well as a leadership team who sees the value in getting out of their mid-Michigan facility to build connections.

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“You can’t be everywhere and you can’t ignore day-to-day operations either, so for us it’s about selecting where and how we network,” said Steve London, Bekum America’s president and COO.

Carr concurred, adding that “industry trade shows and conferences are obviously great opportunities for networking with leading non-competing industry suppliers and our customers themselves.”

Another great opportunity for networking with peers and avoiding disingenuous salespeople are professional organizations at the regional, state and national levels.

“Professional societies often tend to have higher-level participation from within the industry and we tend to work together towards the common good of the industry, which often minimizes the stigma of people just trying to sell something,” Carr offered. “If you put the effort in, what you receive back will bring significant dividends over the long term.”

Continuing that point, London said that “through active participation with local groups, state and national organizations and MMA — each of these can help you develop relationships, meet new contacts and utilize the knowledge and experiences of your peers.”

#### Get More!

Check out the upcoming networking opportunities available to MMA members at right and learn more at [mimfg.org](http://mimfg.org).

## Overcoming Common Challenges

As with anything in business, networking has its challenges. Time constraints can deter manufacturers from networking in the first place, while a passive approach to the process can stop them from trying it a second time.

“Poor workplace time management can ruin your chances to network — people are often too busy or simply distracted,” Carr explained. “They resist joining professional societies for fear of the associated time

## 2019 MMA Networking Opportunities

Networking is built into most MMA events, including event receptions or pre-event breakfasts, with targeted content designed to get peers talking. Make sure you or a member of your team (your membership is company-wide after all) is ready to engage and grow throughout the year.

### MFG Operations Conference

March 7 • East Lansing

Michigan’s most successful CEOs, CFOs and managers know operational success begins by staying atop emerging trends in finance, human resources, talent and technology. Connect with thought leaders on today’s most puzzling operational issues and develop a strategy to stay ahead of the competition.

### MFG Forum

April 23 • Novi

Delivering guidance on emerging issues is at the forefront of MMA’s mission. Learn about manufacturing’s current boom period and what every business owner needs to think about to survive possible future slowdowns.

### MMA Legislative Day

September 10 • Lansing

A two-event, power-packed day featuring MMA Lobby Day and the MMA Legislative Reception. Get “hands-on” lobbying experience while learning about the legislative process and MMA’s efforts to develop a pro-manufacturing economy.

### MFG Excellence Awards

November 7 • East Lansing

Celebrate excellence in manufacturing by honoring the individuals who make a positive impact in their community and to the industry. Hear stories and make lasting memories during Michigan’s annual showcase for manufacturing.

### MMA Policy Committees

Year-Round Networking

Help develop policy direction for the Association, PLUS interact with policymakers and other members of the regulated manufacturing community. Ten committees and multiple issue-specific task forces are available.

“It may sound strange, but lots of businesses don’t think about networking and relationship-building — *associating* with others — when they join *associations*,” explained Hadden. “They are thinking about advocacy, cost-savings or passively receiving information. At MMA, you are surrounded by hundreds of the world’s leading executives and thousands of emerging leaders. By networking, sharing and growing together, you’ll discover new strategies for success you’d never have thought of hidden away behind your facility walls.”

Learn more and register at [mimfg.org](http://mimfg.org).

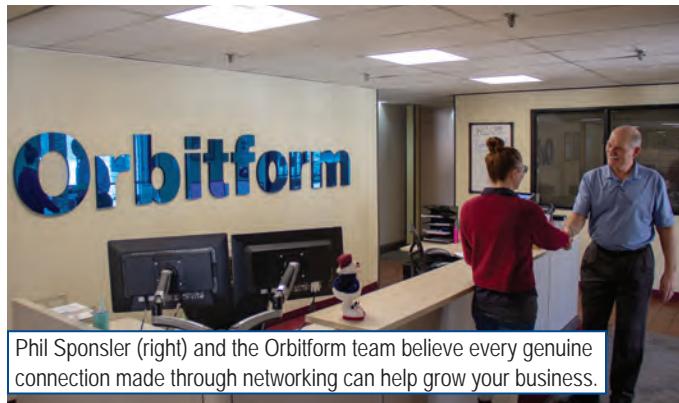
commitments and, at industry trade shows or conferences, they even skip out on the organized social events to return to work. If you choose to network, be there fully, otherwise excellent networking possibilities — and real chances to grow your business — are missed.”

Finally, for the manufacturer who does take the initiative to regularly network, it’s important to also *be proactive and engaged in the way you network* in order to get the most out of it.

“Avoid the tendency to sit by and watch; become engaged,” London suggested. “At times it may seem daunting, but by engaging you’ll find more new ideas. It also helps to step outside your comfort zone. Speak with other ages and other industries; many times, this will bring your views into a new perspective and introduce you to a wider range of peers.”

## Get More

Your company’s present needs cannot be ignored but sacrificing your future is shortsighted and a recipe for disaster. Remember to work with your leadership team to identify available time and resources for a broader networking strategy that plans for tomorrow while still allowing for success today.



Phil Sponsler (right) and the Orbitform team believe every genuine connection made through networking can help grow your business.

“In the words of NIKE, ‘just do it,’” London said. “Meet people, expand your horizons, and listen to others. There is a wealth of knowledge waiting to be explored. Take advantage of it.”

For more information on networking strategies, opportunities across Michigan to meet fellow manufacturers and ways to maximize your MMA membership through relationship-building, contact MMA at 517-487-8533. 



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# Your Support is Critical



“Our ability to support pro-manufacturing candidates is imperative as anti-manufacturing voices are working strategically against our industry. The MMA-PAC is limited to personal contributions from our members, so your contributions as a leader in manufacturing are critical to success in these pivotal mid-term elections.”

— Patrick Curry, MMA-PAC Chair  
and President of Fullerton Tool



Contributing to the MMA-PAC is an investment in Michigan’s future and one of the most affordable and effective ways to support pro-manufacturing legislators and candidates.

Donate online today at [mimfg.org](http://mimfg.org) or contact Brianna Mills: 517-487-8523 or [mills@mimfg.org](mailto:mills@mimfg.org).