

# Relationship Building and Networking

BY EUGENE MCKAY MBA, B.COMM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AFOA SASKATCHEWAN

**AFOA SASKATCHEWAN'S (AFOA SK) MISSION IS TO "PROVIDE SOUND LEADERSHIP AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT TO MEMBERS WITH PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTS AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT THE ROLES IN ABORIGINAL FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL MANAGEMENT." AFOA SK SEEKS OUT COLLABORATIONS THAT ARE BENEFICIAL TO BOTH PARTIES AND REALIZES THAT SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION REQUIRES STRATEGIC NETWORKING WHEN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN A BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT.**

In 2008 AFOA SK did not have any corporate members. Now, in 2013, AFOA SK has twenty-two corporate members. Was this an easy task? To put it simply: no, it was not. In order to achieve success in building strategic alliances, the first step is to know your organization's mission statement and really put some thought into how we as a nonprofit create buy-in for our potential new stakeholders.

In our strategic planning process, AFOA SK set out goals for networking strategically. This process included an honest evaluation of AFOA SK's networking processes and also taking historical look at what worked and what did not work for the organization. In the case of AFOA SK, the historical networking process was limited to the circle of supporters we first created when we began operations. However, a more robust process for creating buy-in for external corporations was needed.

Working with our Board and creating opportunities for our organization was important in building partnerships and for relationship building. In 2008, AFOA SK did not have a website – except the mention on the National AFOA Canada website. So our priority as an organization was to get our website up and running. We had to create leverage, and a website for placement of our potential corporate member's logos and direct links to their respective websites was to be our first step. This would be a revenue generator for AFOA SK.

Once we had the website operational, it was important to have marketing material in place to "sell" the website so we as an organization could generate revenue through the sale of potential corporate memberships, who in turn would "buy" space on our website. Our next step was the development of a corporate membership brochure to outline the benefits in becoming a corporate member.

The brochure added value. AFOA SK identified the benefits in becoming a corporate member. We implemented a "guide to benefits and services," and this was our way of selling and marketing AFOA SK as a potential corporate member. These benefits include:

- » **Advertising** – increasing exposure for potential corporate members to access key Aboriginal decision makers by advertising on AFOA SK's website including their respective corporate logos, along with a corporate profile
- » **Branding Rights** – the right to use AFOA SK's logo on promotional material
- » **Networking opportunities** – created potential collaboration of corporate partners with AFOA SK membership
- » **Conference Priority and Savings** – corporate members receive priority at AFOA SK's conference and free exhibit space
- » **Recruiting New People** – free advertising on AFOA SK's website for corporate member's job posting.

Finding the right fit and seeking out potential stakeholders who realize the value of a partnership and a meaningful relationship with AFOA SK was the next step.

AFOA SK had to be creative and innovative in relationship building. Once again, the Board of AFOA SK played an instrumental role. The Board provided the overall direction of the organization, but more important the Board provided input. The input from the Board was necessary for the success of finding those organizations that fit in with our organizational mission. Much as any other business, for profit or not for profit, there had to be connecting factors that would enhance the business relationship. In small non-profits, the hurdle in building a partnership or relationship with local businesses and organizations is the limited capacity internal to the organization. AFOA SK has only one staff person, and making the connection to external business was challenging.



Ensuring the value added process made sense to the potential partner meant follow up and more follow up; this ensured the connection was made. Once the connection was made it was a matter of making sure value was seen by the potential stakeholder. Once we had this in place, marketing AFOA SK as the organization to be involved with became less of a challenge. Now we had to figure out ways to keep the momentum going to enable AFOA SK to reach potential corporations who would join us and who would believe in our mission.

Networking was an important next step for AFOA SK. Our Board was actively involved in the networking nature of the business. With only one staff and twelve Board members at AFOA SK, it was apparent both to staff and Board that in order to network effectively we all had to play a role in the process. Some networking basics that were effective for AFOA SK were as follows:

- » **Always carry your business card** – this is an inexpensive marketing tool that every organization can afford
- » **Know your organization** – having a pre-planned and thoughtful response to questions asked of your organization goes a long way
- » **Join other organizations in event planning** – this is important. As your network grows, the more you participate as an individual or as an organization. But always find the right balance of your participation and your work commitments
- » **Always ask for a business card when introduced to potential partner or stakeholder**, and take the time to call that person back. Making the connection soon after getting that card is an important next step in making a favorable impression
- » **Create a database and file the business cards** – this will ensure that the contact is not lost
- » **Add your new contact to your electronic mailing list** – this will ensure that he/she is not left out of the loop
- » **Try to make a new contact at least once a month** – if this does not work, then make them whenever the opportunity arises. Having targets is a key motivational factor in getting out there and making connections
- » **Always accept invites to speak** – if you have been invited as a guest speaker this is free marketing for your organization
- » **Participate in the workshops of organizations who fit your organizational goals** – this is an ideal place for networking
- » **Work the room when you are at an event** – this is important for you to get to know the key people in other organizations who may not come to you. In short, don't be a wallflower
- » **Allow for creativity and flexibility for networking within your organization**, but be accountable for your networking
- » **Keep up with social media technology** – this is an effective and efficient way of networking
- » **Always think strategically** – and market whenever opportunities arise

Our networking is not always based on financial reward. Sometimes the reward is getting our name out in the community through our volunteerism. Networking has been instrumental for AFOA SK's success in relationship building.

AFOA SK always looks for the opportunity to network and volunteer. This does not have to be costly for your organization. Some examples of our involvement with external stakeholders are:

- » **CGA Saskatchewan (CGA SK) & AFOA SK Presentations** – AFOA SK & CGA SK promote both the CAFM and CGA programs to post-secondary students attending Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT). In 2011/2012 AFOA SK and CGA Saskatchewan visited and promoted the CAFM and CGA programs at the Prince Albert Campus (October 2011 – 55 students), Regina Campus (February 2012 – 15 students) and the Saskatoon Campus (March 2012 – 20 students). AFOA SK & CGA SK will continue being involved with SIIT to actively recruit new members for both organizations. *"SIIT is thankful for the relationship we have with AFOA SK and CGA SK and value their volunteerism. Both organizations provide information to launch a student into the CAFM or CGA designation."* – Robert Daniels MBA, SIIT Director of Marketing and Communications

*Eugene McKay is a proud member of the James Smith Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. Eugene has over 20 years experience working in a variety of management positions. He completed the Management and Accountancy diplomas through the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT) and then pursued a Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Saskatchewan. Eugene also furthered his education by obtaining a Master of Business Administration at the Edwards School of Business, University of Saskatchewan. Since November 2007, he has worked with the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Saskatchewan as the Executive Director.*

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- » **Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative Career Fair “The Future is Yours Opportunity Fair”** – AFOA SK coordinated the finance and volunteered staff for this career fair. AFOA SK proudly works with the Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative (AWPI), which is committed to helping Aboriginal youth by increasing their participation in the labour market. AWPI’s goal is to “educate and inform employers about the advantages of hiring Aboriginal peoples.” To create awareness, this annual career fair is hosted in Saskatoon to bring potential employers and approximately 700 Aboriginal youth together. AFOA SK participated in this event for the last three years. *“AANDC with their initiative, AWPI, has worked with AFOA SK in promoting Aboriginal employment, education, training and development for Aboriginal students seeking employment in various career areas. We appreciate the involvement of AFOA SK”* - Arlene Goulet, MBA, Major Projects Officer Lands & Economic Development, AANDC Saskatchewan Region
- » **AFOA Canada Financial Literacy for Youth project** - AFOA SK was actively involved in this pilot project. Working in partnership with AFOA Canada, this workshop for youth was piloted in Saskatchewan in 2011/2012. This workshop creates awareness on budgeting and why finance is important for the youth to know and understand. AFOA SK staff participated as a volunteer facilitator.
- » **Summer Student Partnership** – AFOA SK continues to work in partnership with the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC). The Saskatoon Tribal Council’s goal and main objective for their summer student program is to provide the opportunity for students to gain work experience and to develop essential and valuable skills in a supportive environment. AFOA SK takes on a new student each year and has participated in the program for the last 3 years.
- » **Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations Pow Wow 2010 / Wanuskewin Heritage Park Pow Wow 2011** – AFOA SK volunteered staff and supported these annual events
- » **Trade show booth at the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations Chief’s Assembly** – AFOA SK creates awareness and is able to disseminate information to all the First Nations in Saskatchewan and other affiliated organizations at this event
- » **Trade show booth at the provincial CGA Saskatchewan Conference** – this creates awareness of AFOA SK to CGA members and their external stakeholders

Working together can produce alliances that may not have happened if networking and volunteering was not a priority for AFOA SK. As previously stated, there may be no financial reward for AFOA SK in our approach to relationship building, but getting our name out in the community is what we see as being just as important. The success of AFOA SK’s relationship building with organizations that support and enhance our mission was taken to another level with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

AFOA SK was aware of the partnership of AFOA Canada and CGA Canada. AFOA SK set up a meeting with CGA SK to formally introduce ourselves to the provincial association. At the onset of this partnership there was a lack of understanding of the respective organizations goals and respective missions. But networking and inviting the key people in the provincial CGA association to AFOA SK events resulted in a partnership and a meaningful business relationship. CGA SK reciprocated through invites to their events, and the work in the development of this alliance began. The alliance was developed through meetings in the years 2010 -2011 to collaborate on initiatives of mutual benefit. Both organizations were poised for growth and engagement in Saskatchewan. Both organizations recognized that the development of strategic collaborations is critical in leveraging opportunities. The end result came to fruition in 2011. CGA Saskatchewan and AFOA Saskatchewan officially signed a MOU November 2nd, 2011.

*“Both our organizations have a common priority of developing strategic alliances and investing in community relationships. The partnership between CGA SK and AFOA SK has been valuable in connecting with specific sectors of the community and advancing our respective mission and mandate”* – Prabha Vaidyanathan, M.S.W., Executive Director & Chief Executive Officer, Certified General Accountants Association of Saskatchewan

As in any case for partnerships there has to be an ongoing relationship. We have to ask ourselves questions such as:

- » What is working and what is not?
- » Are we meeting each other's needs?
- » Are we achieving meaningful results?

This all takes effort and time. Both sides have to stay committed to the partnership, and the MOU we signed with CGA SK is a living document that has to be continuously revisited to ensure that the partnership is meeting the needs of each organization. In Saskatchewan collaboration with organizations is an important part of operations, but we know it is the individual members who are the pillars of strength for our organization.

Individual membership is now at 257, and AFOA SK recognizes and applauds the widespread support of the communities and organizations. The driving force behind any organization is its membership, and this driving force is what has made AFOA SK a successful chapter. With the continued support of our members and with the development of new relationships, AFOA SK will continue to strive to meet the needs of its members and their respective communities and organizations. Our success is the direct result of the commitment of the 257 members who help us reach out to new members by networking amongst others in their respective organizations/communities. Never underestimate the power of networking and word of mouth.

AFOA SK would not be where we are today without the support from the Aboriginal leaders in Saskatchewan. AFOA SK acknowledges those strategic thinkers in our educational institutions, our financial institutions and our political bodies and in our First Nation/Aboriginal communities. It was those leaders who laid the foundation for Aboriginal organizations to thrive in Saskatchewan. Now it is up to us as a provincial organization to keep building relationships that will foster growth for AFOA. Let us continue on with this journey of networking and relationship building.

For more information, visit our website at [www.afoask.ca](http://www.afoask.ca) or contact Eugene McKay at 306-477-1066 or [afoa.sask@sasktel.net](mailto:afoa.sask@sasktel.net)

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