This summer I learned about spark plugs. In the past, I've been content to turn the key in my ignition in blissful ignorance of the why's and the how's of the operation. Like most things that occur when I flip a switch, I had assigned spark plugs to that very large box in my brain called magic.

Spark plugs somersaulted out of the magic box when I had to do some research for a project I am writing. I put the information in the other box. Yes, there are only two boxes: magic and other. It turns out they do some pretty daunting things, these spark plugs.

When the wires from the battery carry the current to the spark plugs, they actually spark, (I kid you not) inside the piston chamber where a controlled slurry of air and gas reside, resulting in an explosion and this explosion which occurs over and over again (I can't understand why cars are not louder) forces the piston down in the chamber which turns the crank which does something to the cam which tells the spark plugs when to fire and in what order, all the while opening valves to let in more air and gas and the tires begin rolling forward as the transmission is engaged, whew! At least this is how it works in my '92 Suburban. I can't speak for you Prius folks or any late model fuel injection systems (or anything else for that matter including lawn mowers and all Kitchenaid appliances.)

The way I see it, sparks are like ideas that keep the eight cylinders of your business firing. Seven of them are covered in the Residential Forum Shop Talk Groups (starting in October.) And the eighth? The magic box.

I hope you enjoyed your summer and learned a few nifty things as well. May the Forum be with you.

Sincerely,

Julie Gehrke
How to Make Open Networking Events Work for You

By Tom Lopatosky info@lopccontracting.com

In this day and age there are many forms of networking. There are internet Social Networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, and the like. There are structured networking organizations like BNI and similar groups. There are also unstructured networking opportunities such as Chamber of Commerce open events and comparable gatherings where people are put in a room and invited to “network”. My focus here will be on unstructured networking events and how to actually gain value from them.

When I first started attending these open networking events, I was as bad as bad could be. Actually, the first open event I went to was a Statewide Business “After-hours”. I walked in one door, saw how many people were there in attendance, was totally intimidated, and literally walked right out another door. As I was walking away I can remember saying to myself, “How in the world can anyone make such chaos work to benefit their business?”

Fast forward four years. Today, open unstructured networking events are a valuable component of our marketing mix and our business plan in general. How did this happen and how can you make this true for you as well? First, you must be persistent and also accept that these types of events usually do not generate immediate results.

I have noticed that many people who attend these gatherings think the most effective way for them to generate business is using “grenade” tactics and they try to get their business cards in as many people’s hands as possible. I have no idea if this works for them, but I do know that it seems very impersonal when this happens. The person that receives the card has no intimate connection with the card “thrower”, and with so many cards being handed out, one has to wonder what the percentage of follow-up and actual future contact between the two parties will be like.

Contrast that approach with the “sniper” tactic that we have found to be successful over the past few years. I aim at attending four of these open networking events each month. At each event, my main goal is to find one person that I find interesting, whom I see potential in for future referrals (both to and from), and who seems to have himself or herself together. I may find more than one, but usually not often, because the focus is to create a lasting connection with the individual. If all of my criteria are met, I ask for the person’s card and if they wouldn’t mind if I followed up with them to get together for coffee, lunch, etc. so I can find out a bit more about their business and what it is they do. What person that has it together

Continued on page 4...
Through The Eyes Of A New Attendee

Editor’s Note: We know it’s been a tough year for most, but despite the many reasons not to come, we were all glad to see some new faces around the table at AST 11. Here’s what two new attendees had to say about their experience after returning home from the conference.

TOM LOPATOSKY, JR,
LOPCO CONTRACTING

What prompted you to sign up to attend AST this year?
The idea of being able to share “best practices” and ideas with other residential painting contractors from all over the country.

What were your expectations coming into the conference?
I expected to learn a lot but was unsure what that really meant as I had never attended AST before. I had attended the national PDCA convention in the past but I knew this was more geared towards business owners whose companies paralleled mine more consistently than the wide variety of types of companies one would meet at the national conference.

What portion of the conference did you find to be the most valuable?
I loved the speakers. The round table discussions were great as well but the speakers and the variety subjects they touched were absolutely invaluable in terms of information they put out to the attendees.

What was your biggest take away how do you plan to put it to use in your business?
My biggest take away was a few quick points that people made during some of the class-time stuff that I would be able to implement right away. Things such as Summit Consulting’s Brian Nolan’s suggestion of having a “Next Step Agreement” during the sales process and PDCA CEO’s Richard Greene’s suggestion about having the PDCA do press releases for paint companies’ involvement in their communities are examples of simple things that can have immediate impact on our business.

What would you like to see more (or less) of at next year’s conference?
Perhaps a designated time where we can have an open forum where a moderator can open up the floor for people to share problems they are currently experiencing in their business. This would allow other members of the group that may have had similar experiences to share their thoughts/suggestions for possible solutions. Although this happens as a by-product of the round table discussions in many cases, I think it would be nice to do it as an overall group. Some of the best ideas that were generated from AST I think happened when we were in a class as a group and we went off on a tangent – tangents which I believe ended up being valuable to many people in the group. It would be great to set aside time to specifically allow these types of “tangents” to naturally happen but in a controlled sort of way.

Any additional thoughts/comments.
I loved the fact that the event was in Charleston. I think Charleston has some of the best conglomerations of historic homes anywhere in the country and the food and things to do are phenomenal. I think I was spoiled by having the first AST event I attended in such a beautiful and historically significant city.

TIM BAECHLE, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF MARKETING,
SHERWIN WILLIAMS

What prompted you to sign up to attend AST this year?
Continued on page 5...
How to Make Open Networking Events Work for You   continued from page 2...

would refuse an opportunity to tell someone about their business and what they do? I love it when somebody happens to ask me this, after all – you cannot sell a secret! Once I have made my new connection, I spend the rest of the event catching up with those that I have already had the chance to get to know, and continue to scout as well.

If each month you attend a minimum of four events, at the end of the year you should have acquired forty-eight legitimate contacts in your hemisphere, which can be groomed to help promote your business if utilized properly. Please keep in mind that this is assuming your follow up has been done properly and you have been able to get the people you met through these events to believe in you and your business. Once you have had an initial meeting with them, be sure to diligently work on your relationships with these people when you have the opportunity. An example would be asking the other party if they minded if you linked up with them on one of the social networking sites or at the very least approaching them and striking up brief conversations when you see

them at future events.

I have utilized this practice and it has worked out very well for my business. Through this process I have been able to build relationships with more than two hundred people over the past four years. That is more than two hundred people that would refer me at the drop of a dime – many that have never even seen the work that we produce. These individuals trust me because of the relationship that has been formed over time. Because of this formed trust, they have no problem referring me or my company. What a great feeling!

This great feeling obviously has gradually developed and is far different from the feeling I got when I walked into my first open networking event where I felt completely out of place and left right away. I was not out of place at that first meeting, I just didn't have a plan. Develop your plan and attack. You too may be surprised at how much this type of networking may benefit your business if utilized properly and the ease at which it is able to be done.

Editor’s Note: AST 12 – You Cant’ Afford Not To Be There

by Suhaiba Neill sneill@johnneillpainting.com

We all knew going into AST 11 that the last 18 months have been the toughest many of us have ever seen, and this was reflected in the number of business owners who made the trip to Charleston. Despite the smaller group, the level of focus over the course of the weekend was intense and the presentations were all extremely relevant to the times we now find ourselves living in.

The topics covered included detailed information on how to make our businesses more productive, how to lower our personal stress levels as well as the stress level of our business, how to identify and market appropriately to dormant versus frequent painters, and how to help us clearly define the many roles we all encompass on a daily basis and set clear goals within each of those roles. The roundtable discussions also generated some fabulous ideas that we probably would not have arrived upon if left to our own devises. One of the biggest benefits though were the takeaways that could immediately (and fairly easily) be implemented upon our return home to our respective businesses. Overall, I think we all left with a much-needed feeling of rejuvenation and some new tools in our back pockets to help set our companies apart from the crowd.

The Current Residential Forum Board is working diligently on the planning of AST 12, which will be held in the fall of 2011. We are taking into consideration the dates and accessibility of the chosen location in hopes of making it easier for all to attend and welcome your input. Ultimately though, we need your involvement and participation to make future events a success. Hope to see you around the table next year.
Sherwin-Williams has consistently supported the efforts of PDCA particularly when a program helps improve the overall quality and image of the painting industry. AST peaked my interest because it would give me the opportunity to hear what’s on the minds of our customers in an unfiltered environment.

What were your expectations coming into the conference?
I really wasn’t sure what to expect as this was my first time at AST, but based on previous conferences I expected to see a lot of talking heads with limited interaction with the audience. That was not the case here, the panel discussions were very interactive and I was pleasantly surprised to see how candidly the group shared their perspective on each of the topics. Everyone in attendance seemed genuinely interested in helping others by sharing what worked best for them in their business model.

What portion of the conference did you find to be the most valuable?
It’s hard to pick just one area because all the topics were pertinent to the business. Since I work in marketing it was interesting to see that contractors wrestle with many of the same issues as a paint supplier in the areas of lead generation, enhancing your brand, and where to invest your marketing efforts. Almost every topic gave me an added perspective that will help us develop tools and programs to enhance the services and support we provide to the painting professionals.

I did find the round table format particularly helpful as these conversations seemed to dive a little deeper into each topic.

What was your biggest take away how do you plan to put it to use in your business?
The topic of color selection and how it can be a differentiating feature for a contractor when closing a deal with a homeowner. I have heard this before, but it seemed to resonate with the group. We have several tools available, but I believe we may be able to take it to another level. I also took away several ideas on how we may be able to provide more services and resources for the professional via our website.

What would you like to see more (or less) of at next year’s conference?
Overall the conference had a good blend of guest speakers, panel discussion, and roundtable discussions. As a vendor, I’d love to have the opportunity to submit topics or questions that could be discussed in this forum. Feedback from this group would be like a focus group on steroids and based on the conversations I observed at AST, this group will shoot you straight, which is invaluable for a supplier.

Any additional thoughts/comments.
I thoroughly enjoyed my time at AST. I can’t say enough about how involved the group was throughout the conference from beginning to end. I’ve attended other conferences where participation was spotty or that lost steam and attendance toward the end. AST has set a high standard. Keep up the great work.

DISCLAIMER - While this newsletter is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information on subjects covered, the association is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional or technical advice. Accordingly, the association cannot warrant the accuracy of the information contained in the newsletter and disclaims any and all liability, which may result from publication of or reliance on the information provided herein. If legal advice or other expert assistance or advice is required, the services of a competent, professional person should be sought.

Join Us On Facebook
Check out the PDCA Residential Forum page on facebook which includes a discussion board. Visit: http://tinyurl.com/of53cd
No question about it. In this economy it’s tough to compete. I’m up against competitors who will underbid me on paint projects by as much as half, so I’ve been focusing on how to help my painting crew to become more efficient while still maintaining our reputation for quality and attention to detail.

To do that, I’m paying more attention than ever before to new tools and products that will increase both worker and job efficiency. Survival in this market means I need to be able to do the job twice as fast as my competition while maintaining superior quality workmanship. I constantly travel to trade shows and read trade magazines, scouting for tools and products that will give me a leg up on my competitors.

As a result, I’ve found some great tools that I’ve put to work in my business. They’ve helped me increase productivity and efficiency and they can do that for you too. Here’s my list of Top 10 Paint Tools and Products.

**HYDE QUICKREACH AIRLESS SPRAY GUN EXTENSION POLE**

Put this tool in your trailer and your crew can forget about hopping ladders around a house. Using this extension pole, you can reach most one and two story houses from the ground. An extra advantage of this pole is that it’s adjustable so you won’t have the problem of the pole clogging with paint because only the gun head attaches to the end of the pole (and there’s no pain in the butt cleaning when the job is done.) These poles are telescoping and come in three different sizes. If you don’t have this spray pole in your arsenal of tools you’re not as efficient as you could be – or as your competitors may be.

**PIVIT PROVISIONAL TOOLS “LADDER LEVELER”**

This is one of my favorite tools because it allows you to level any ladder inside our out. You know how dangerous it can be to paint outdoors where the landscaping is uneven and you don’t get your ladder leveled properly. PiViT allows you to level your ladder even in the most uneven terrain. Use PiViT and you’ll find that the stairwell wall that you thought was impossible to paint can now be painted safely.

**FLEX-TEC HV BY ADVANCE REPAIR TECHNOLOGY**

This is a GREAT product for exterior and interior wood repair because it is flexible. Flex-Tec expands and contracts. That means it stays firmly in place despite the constant expansion and contraction that wood makes during seasonal changes. Another cool feature of this product is you can sculpt it to match even the most detailed trim piece. Forget hiring a carpenter when you put Flex-Tec HV in your tool box!
You’ll also want to check out Advance Repair Technology’s new glazing compound. Glaze Ease comes in a caulk tube, is easy to apply, and ready to paint in just two hours.

**GRACO PROSHOT BATTERY POWERED AIRLESS CUP GUN**

This is one of the newest COOL paint tools to hit the market. It’s so cool Graco can’t keep them in stock. I waited weeks for mine at my paint store, so when it came in I bought two, which made my crew really happy. This spray gun is great for those jobs that are a bit too small to justify loading up the big airless, yet it helps you save a ton of time by spraying deck furniture, spindles, out of reach chimneys. Just this week we used it to apply liquid mask to the windows of an old house we are painting. Right now this gun is only available at Sherwin Williams.

**FROG TAPE**

Razor sharp lines are what our customers expect and Frog Tape helps us deliver! If your business is like mine – where superior service and quality is what you promise – you want to deliver those perfect lines, especially in the home’s interior. I’ve been painting for over 20 years and I’ve tried every make and color of tape that has come out on the market. None – I mean none – have given me a razor sharp line like Frog Tape.

**WALL PATCH**

In the past, fixing a large hole in drywall has been a time consuming task. Now, with these nifty wall repair patches that you can buy at your local hardware store, this job is no longer a headache. Wall Patch comes in several different sizes from small to large. Simply put the patch over your hole. It stays in place by itself because it has an adhesive backing. Apply two coats of drywall mud, prime and paint.

**LIQUID MASK**

Old homes often have multiple pane windows which are commonly cut into decorative shapes. Trying to cut in all these windows by hand and maintain a perfectly straight line can be a daunting task for even the fastest and steadiest paint crew member. This is where liquid mask comes to the rescue! Simply brush or spray liquid mask over the window pane before painting. Then either brush or spray your wood window trim with paint. After you’re done painting the wood window trim just take a sharp painter’s knife, cut around the edge of the pane and pull the liquid mask off the window. Liquid mask won’t stick permanently to glass. It will stick like glue to wood trim though, so apply cautiously.

**LADDER MAX LADDER STABILIZER**

Ladder Max gives you the stability of a traditional ladder stabilizer but has the correct angle on it to safely go up over rain gutters and stabilize a ladder. The Ladder Max boots sit on the roof. Every handyman and painter needs at least one Ladder Max.

**GRIP N GUARD**

Have you ever needed to cover up cabinets or walls when painting ceilings? This can be really slow going, especially if you need to tape the visqueen in place to make it stay. Now Grip N Guard has made surface protection a cinch. Grip N Guard is a self-adhering masking film that clings to just about any surface without taping. Make your masking duties a lot less painful with Grip N Guard.

**BELT BUCKET**

One of my all time favorite painting tools is the Belt Bucket! When it comes to painting trim having the right cup to dip your brush in can make all the difference in the world. The Belt Bucket is a dip cup that attaches to your waist with a belt. It comes with removable, disposable liners, a lid and a clip to hold your brush or roller when you’re climbing ladders. You can feel safe when climbing ladders because your paint is secured to your hip and your hands are free to hold onto the ladder. Another cool feature of the Belt Bucket is that your paint doesn’t spill out when you bend over. Try the Belt Bucket and I guarantee you won’t be disappointed.

Have a great tool or tip in your bag of tricks? Please forward it along for inclusion in the next issue.
The inaugural Shop Talk Groups were launched this Spring by the Residential Forum and have concluded to rave reviews.

Three different groups were established, and met weekly for 60 minutes via teleconference for 7 consecutive weeks. Weekly topics included Leadership, Money Management, Resource Management, Selling, Branding, Marketing, and Fulfillment.

Residential Forum president Julie Gehrke had a vision for an outlet that would allow business owners a chance to sharpen their business skills in a peer-to-peer setting. The Shop Talk Groups gave owners a chance to meet with other like minded painting contractors via teleconferencing. Group members contributed some of their experiences and expertise acting as a sounding board for ways to improve each others operations. We wear many hats as owners of small businesses and are required to manage things we do well and things we don’t do so well. The Peer Groups filled a need for both emerging and established firms to look at each aspect of their companies, share some strengths, and do some work on their weaknesses. Weekly goal setting also increased the level of accountability, ensuring that all participants gained true value from the seven-week commitment.

Here are a few testimonials from the premier group:

“*The insights you get as you prepare for the calls in addition to the peer feedback during the calls are tremendous.*”

“To have an accountability group of your own peers to call on is great.”

“Business owners are often isolated and forums like this help to break the isolation and help clarify what matters most.”

“The Shop Talk Group was a great opportunity to talk openly with contractors about aspects of our businesses and receive invaluable feedback to help get to the next level.”

For those of you who were unable to participate in the first session, we are already planning the next Shop Talk Groups for this coming fall. If you are interested in participating, please complete the Shop Talk Groups Registration Form and fax it back today so we can plan appropriately. Hope to hear you on a future call.
AST 11 - Around The Table In Charleston

Whether it was a dinner table or a discussion table, we all walked away filled to the brim. Here are a few testimonials from this year’s conference.

“Every year AST is a highlight for me.”
Eric Hernanz, Hernanz Painting

“I appreciate everyone taking the time from work to attend this year’s AST.”
Tom Reber, Jalapeno Paint Werx

“AST is about sharing. When we share it uplifts the spirit.”
John Peek, Peek Brothers

“The group this year was very focused. I can’t think of time or money better spent.”
Doug Imhoff, Imhoff Painting

“I learn more at AST than I can ever implement in a year.”
John Neill, John Neill Painting

“Tremendous value you receive from everyone.”
Tony Severino, Professional Painters

“First time I’ve attended an AST. I received a tremendous amount of ideas. Thank you for sharing.”
Bob Boselowitz, Drexel Hill Painting

“My first time at AST. This has been invaluable for me to hear what are the issues you as painting contractors are facing. By far the best thing I have ever attended.”
Tim Baechle, Sherwin Williams

“I appreciate the openness and sharing of ideas.”
Mike Kelly, Crestwood Painting

“This was my first AST. I can’t wait to put all these ideas into place.”
Tom Lopatosky, Lopco Contracting

We hope to see even more new and familiar faces around the table next year at AST 12.
Establishing Lifelong Relationships With Your Customers

by Suhaiba Neill sneill@johnneillpainting.com

Do you know the lifetime value of your average customer? Or in plain English, the amount of money they will spend on the services your company provides over the course of their lifetime? This is something that came up during the discussion at AST 11 this past summer, and for most of us, I’m sure it’s more than we realize, which got me to thinking. Often times, when things aren’t so good, the phone isn’t quite ringing enough, and the estimate stream isn’t as steady as we had hoped, we spend oodles of time and money trying to come up with ways to generate new leads. But what about all those past customers that are just sitting in your database ripe for the picking? If you know your numbers, you probably know what your cost per lead and your cost per sale for a new customer is, but what about the cost to keep a customer for life? I’d venture to guess that it’s minimal compared to the cost to find a new one. The relationship is already established, the money has already been spent, and in the age of email marketing, staying in touch is more affordable than ever. There are, however a few critical elements to establishing lifelong relationships with customers, and if it’s too late for some of your past customers, try it moving forward with your new ones in hopes of building for the future. Hopefully you can use some of the points outlined below to boost your own set of “best practices” and keep your existing customers coming back for many years.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN ESTABLISHING LIFELONG RELATIONSHIPS:

• For the customer, it’s not just about the paint job. Sure they want things to look great when you’re done, but it’s more about the overall level of service they receive, and it starts with the initial phone call.

• Does everyone in your company, from the helpers to the boss, convey your company culture with each customer encounter? It is critical that the customer experience is consistent with everyone they deal with if you are looking to build a lifetime of trust.

• Do you have a clear script for answering the phone and scheduling the estimate? Does it include engaging the customer while gathering the needed information rather than just reading down a list of questions?

• Does your estimator arrive on time and engage with the customer while completing the estimate?

• Is the estimate delivered in a timely fashion and does your salesman engage with the customer when meeting to review the estimate rather than just try to sell, sell, sell?

• Once booked, is the job scheduled in a timely fashion and how is this information conveyed back to the customer?

• Do you provide them with a “customer prep list” so they can prepare properly for the upcoming project? The more they know about what to expect, the more comfortable they will be.

• What happens on the first day of the job? Does the Foreman review things with the customer before starting the project?

• On every project, there is almost always an opportunity to exceed the customer’s expectation (and it usually doesn’t have anything to do with the painting itself). Are your painter’s aware and attuned to this? This could be your chance to win a customer for life, and get some great referrals to do work for their friends and family as well.

• What happens at the end of the job? Do you send a thank you note or make a follow up phone call? Make sure each and every customer (big or small) gets a follow up “touch” and this will go along way in solidifying the relationship.

Ultimately, when all is said and done, you want your customer’s experience to have been so extraordinary that you will stand alone in their mental Rolodex when it comes time for another project (one painting contractor attested to being called for a repaint estimate and discovered upon arrival that the homeowner didn’t even remember that they had used him the first time around). If you can establish this type of relationship, what started out as an average stand-alone paint job could ultimately add up to thousands of dollars on your bottom line in the years to come. It really pays (literally) to stay in touch.
The Residential Forum is pleased to introduce Shop Talk Groups to members.

**PURPOSE**
For Residential Forum members to get together in small groups with non-competing peers for support and goal setting during topically based facilitated discussion sessions. The groups will cover seven topics, meeting for one hour, once a week, for seven weeks. Groups will begin in early October, 2010. Discussions will center on homework questions sent to the members in advance of each session.

**Topics to be covered:**
1. Leadership
2. Money Management
3. Resource Management
4. Branding
5. Going To Market
6. Selling
7. Filling The Order

Write the times you are available under the weekdays you are available. Then, circle your first and second choice, and star* your first choice.

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**AGREEMENT**
You will be contacted regarding the session day and time. You must agree to the following: *I am able to commit to attending all of the sessions scheduled. I understand that I may have one absence if necessary; additional absences may result in my dismissal from the group in order to maintain accountability and group cohesiveness. If this occurs, I may join a future group when my schedule permits. I agree to maintain confidentiality regarding the information my fellow group members share.*

**APPLICATION SIGNATURE**

**PAYMENT**
Payment may be made by Visa or Mastercard in the amount of $35.00 by completing the information below. Please fax this form to Tony Kozak, Executive Director of the PDCA Residential Forum at: 716-632-8437 (fax)

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**BILLING SIGNATURE**
The Craftsmanship Forum Column

1. How can I caulk cracks on the outside of the house when they are too large for caulk? Before putting the caulk in the crack, place a foam backer rod in the crack and then caulk over it. Ref. RE-PR-6

2. After I paint for a while, my brush does not release the paint as efficiently. How can I prevent this? Clean and condition the brush periodically during the day. Ref. RE-PT-6

3. After sanding my outside trim, I can’t get a smooth transition between the old paint and the bare wood. How can I get a smoother transition? Prime the area with a high-build primer and then re-sand the area again with fine sandpaper. RE-PR-10

4. When I paint my six-panel doors, how can I prevent paint from pooling in the bottom corners of the panels? Try brushing away from the corners instead of brushing into them. Ref. RE-PT-1

5. When I coat shakes, what size brush should I use? Use the largest brush that will still provide for appropriate cut-lines and also a consistent finish coat. Ref. RE-PT-2