

# Giving better to connect better at The Ruhlin Group

“Start small and start now.” That’s what CEO John Ruhlin says about the shift from networking to value-creating connection: “5 or 10 of the right relationships can radically change your business, but you have to actually care when building them to realize their value.”



## INTERVIEW WITH:

### John Ruhlin

Founder and CEO, The Ruhlin Group  
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John Ruhlin is the founder and CEO of gift strategy and logistics company The Ruhlin Group. He is also the author of *Giftology* (Lioncrest Publishing, June 2016) and a regular speaker on the subject of gift-giving in business.

## To give is human

“Going back to ancient times, you read about kings giving kings cattle in proportion to how much they valued the relationship,” says John. “Giving is in our DNA. We all want to be valued. But in business today, gifts are usually given generically or as a bribe or not at all. Many of our clients admit that they don’t even know what to give their significant others, so how can they know what to give their professional contacts?” The best gifts are meaningful and take people by surprise, John explains. He points to one of their recent projects for the Chicago Cubs baseball team as an example. When John’s team found out that the old wood from the Cubs’ lockers was going to be thrown out, they brainstormed ways to put it to better use. “They thought it was weird when we asked them to give us the wood,” laughs John. “We ended up using it to build 400 Bluetooth speakers and told the Cubs’ management to give them to their 400 most valuable relationships. The response from the people who received this thoughtful artefact as a gift has been overwhelming.”

## Acknowledging the value of your relationships

“We eat our own dog food,” says John, explaining that the Ruhlin Group as a whole is committed to showing thoughtful appreciation in their relationships with their own clients and employees. “We show appreciation for our employees by, for example, paying to have their houses cleaned every other week. And we empower our teams to be givers in their relationships with our clients. Each account manager is given a yearly budget to invest in acts of appreciation, with the team of 10 as a whole equipped to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.” Up to \$250, account managers are free to invest as they see fit; higher spending than that, and they must check in first. Decisions around how much to spend are based on how much business clients give the company and, for prospects, the value of potential business. “Our policy is to invest 5% of the low end of net profits, and 15% of the high end of net profits,” John reports. “This might seem like an insane amount of money to be spending, but the outcome — stronger relationships — is worth the investment.”

## Do business with friends

John argues that the old precept, *Don't do business with friends*, is a myth that only applies if you aren't prepared to deliver. "If you over-promise and under-deliver, if you cut corners then, no, you shouldn't do business with friends," he says. "But if you are ready to triple down whenever a mistake is made so in the end your customers are glad it happened, it will only strengthen the friendship. If you're really adding value, it isn't awkward. Some of my best friends are also my clients." John explains that his policy is to be hired and to hire only people whom he terms "givers": "I prefer to do business with people I want to be around, and generous people don't tend to be jerks. We hire givers, and we have the same principle when it comes to our clients... Most companies don't fire enough bad clients!"

## Small is more: selective networking

How does John connect with givers? "I used to be the person who was going to networking events and passing out cards. But I stopped because I found that A) It doesn't feel good. B) It's too time consuming. C) It doesn't work. It's poor ROI. We all have limited time, so whatever networking you're going to spend your time on, it better be worth it." For John, what makes a networking event worth his time is the curation of the guest list, which he says should be capped at 100-130 people: "At a lot of events, there is just speaker after speaker, but today I can listen to those talks on YouTube. The best of these events brings together the right mix of people and then provides enough downtime for us to

exchange ideas. For me, that's where the magic is. It's more effective for me to go to 1 such event which brings together 100 giver CEOs, than a hundred events that have not been curated as well." When John and his teams connect with new contacts or prospects, at such events or elsewhere, they follow up. "People's most valuable asset is their time, but it's rarely acknowledged in any kind of significant way. That's why when someone gives me or my teams even just 30 minutes of his or her time, particularly at the very start of our relationship, our policy is to follow-up with a gift and a handwritten note. Unlike a Christmas gift, these gifts stand out, because no one else sends them. Most people shout the same message as everyone else - which has become even more evident since the advent of social networks - and then they wonder why no one hears them. You have to stand out."

When asked about the difference between networkers and "super connectors," John says: "Networkers are focused on quantity: connectors are more focused on quality. I evaluate my network not in terms of its size but in terms of the depth of the relationships. Who will take my phone call? Who will move to action for me? It's about helping each other and of course it goes both ways. And it's always more meaningful when it's really big challenges. I can invest my time and resources in showing up in non-important ways for 20 people, or I can take that time and energy to solve an important problem for just 2 people. The latter is what's impactful and builds momentum over time."

“Every business leader knows that relationships matter, but generally we suck at deepening them, at acknowledging each other as human beings.”

## Using social media with connective intelligence

"Most people go to social media to brag. But the best connectors use it to brag about other people," John says. "My teams also use social media as a way to do research. Even if real connection still comes down to old-school one-on-one contact, you can use social media to glean depth of information about people."