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The art of networking

Ivan Misner came face to face with the importance of networking when his largest client faced financial difficulties and didn't renew his consulting contract.

"I decided to focus on getting referrals," said Misner, "because a referral is by far and away the best way to make a new contact."



By Neil R.G. Young

As Misner thought about the process, the idea came to him to establish a formal network of likeminded generous entrepreneurs. As a management expert, Misner intuitively understood that structure brings success.

Therefore, this could not be a loose group of friends casually passing leads; the group needed to be highly structured with weekly meetings and an agenda to pass qualified referrals. The group, as Misner envisioned it, would not allow competitors to participate. Only one person from each profession would be eligible to join.

Good ideas have a way of spreading, and in the last 18 years, Misner's little networking group has grown into BNI or, Business Network International, an organization with more than 3,000 chapters all over the world with more than 70 in Maryland.

Networking is an art that requires not only good social and communication skills, but a genuine spirit of generosity. The motto of BNI is "Givers Gain" and it's true. Anyone who tries networking with the idea that they are going to get lots of referrals will be sadly disappointed.

Andrew Rose, director of Marketing at Naden/Lean LLC, a certified public accounting and business consulting firm in Timonium, has a great deal to say on the



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subject, and he should know: those who know him consider him a consummate networker.

Rose explains the advantages of participating in a networking group are several fold. First, he says, you have a cadre of peers with an understanding of your service or product who are actively seeking referrals for you.

Secondly, he advises, there is a degree of discipline required to not only attend meetings regularly, but to proactively look for referrals for other members. This quality, he points out, is sometimes lacking in new salespeople, and if you aren't actively seeking to help others, you won't benefit

from any kind of networking. A spirit of generosity is a vital ingredient. "Givers Gain," or "Give to Receive."

"The old adage holds true: people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care," Rose explains. "People tend to build stronger bonds with those that they know on a personal level."

Networking is often more about who you are than what you do. This means you have to take time to get to know people.

Sadly, many people go to networking events because they're victims of downsizing and they're looking for ways to get their name on the street. For many of these people the effort comes too late. One lesson in networking is this: develop

your network before you need it.

On Purpose Networking for Women is a networking group with three chapters in Maryland. The founder, Ginny Robertson, is one who definitely adheres to the credo of generosity.

“Part of the philosophy of On Purpose Networking for Women is that of giving,” explains Robertson. “At each meeting I encourage each woman to truly notice the person she is talking to. Listen to what they say and what they may need. See if there is any way you can help. It can be through an encouraging word, a referral, another connection, an idea, a book they can read ... anything. But it is the spirit of giving that gets the results.”

On Purpose Networking for Women has approximately 150 members and is growing rapidly.

Rose points out formal networking groups are not just for people breaking into the business. Rather, they are for anyone, including seasoned professionals.

“I applaud professional service firms that have partners or senior-level managers in networking groups,” he says. “On one level, it shows that they haven’t become complacent. They are actively seeking to grow their book of business or act as rainmakers for others in the firm.

On another level, it tends to be one of the most effective public relations tools available.”

Being part of a faith-based group or a civic organization such as Rotary, Kiwanis or Lions that attempts to give back to the community is a great way to network as long as you join for the right reasons. If you’re willing to commit and work hard you will make many generous friends. However, serving others is the main purpose for joining these groups. Share the load and do what you say you’ll do and finish what you start. If you’re in it for the business, your motives will quickly become apparent.

If you’re in a formal group whose purpose is to give and receive referrals, Rose has this advice.

“Visit as many different networking groups as possible,” he advises. “Some groups will have a business to consumer focus, some are business to business, and some are big business to big business. Find which style meets your needs best. Also, some groups meet weekly, others semi-monthly, monthly or quarterly. Before you join a group, make a commitment to attend the meetings and have a suitable substitute if you can’t.

“Some groups are vertical market specific; know your market. Also there is gen-

erally a cost associated with joining a group. And, as minor a point it may appear at first, take into account the personalities of others in the group. Little annoyances have a way of growing in magnitude over time.”

Jerry Schwartz, executive director of BNI in Maryland describes the consummate networker this way:

“Great networkers are people who have passion for what they do and a passion to help others. They are out there listening to the needs of others, looking to discover a connection between two people. They truly understand the philosophy of ‘Givers Gain!’”

If you want to learn more about the art of networking, Misner will hold a seminar at the Cross Keys Radisson on April 21. For more information you can go online at <http://www.bnimaryland.com>.

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