

Finding a Networking Group

06/02/08

I need your help evaluating a networking group that I recently joined. As a **small business owner**, I know I need to be out more, meeting more people, but how do I know if this is the right place to be. And if it isn't where else should I look?

Networking is part of the **business success strategy** for any **business owner**. Think of networking as part of your **leadership development plan**. It's your job to build up relationships, and participate in environments that are going to help you, and your company.

There are tons of organizations out there that can help you **grow your business**. The variety is nearly infinite. Also keep in mind that needs and organizations change from time to time. Sometimes it's about knowing when to move on.

How do you find networking groups? Put the word out that you're looking. Go through listings in newspapers and on the internet. Gather recommendations from colleagues. Ask for information – what are the groups you find all about? Don't just assume that because it works for a colleague, it will be what you need.

Start with you. Here are some questions to ask. Who do I want to meet? What do I want to learn about? What credentials am I looking to add? How much time

can I commit to any organization? How frequently do I want contact? What part of the day works best for me: morning, afternoon or evening?

Pay attention to logistics. You'll be much further ahead if you look to fit an organization into your life, rather than the other way around. Try to find an organization that matches your schedule, meets near where you work or live, and that has some membership in common with something you know or do.

Pick your shots. Don't try to be everywhere, or you'll likely burn out. Do you want weekly or monthly contact? What about the people? Looking for people to validate your experiences, or people to share like experiences? Or are you trying to get out of a rut and into new territory?

Define your most critical needs. Education, friendship, an environment to share experiences, these are all legitimate reasons to join a group. Recruiting, finding vendors, seeking prospects and leads, building connections – these are also appropriate reasons to join an organization.

If you want education, join a group that is committed to teaching. If you need to find employees, look for people who have connections in your target industry. If you're looking for vendors, join a **trade association**.

Looking for sales prospects? Be sure the group has contacts in your company's **target market**. Check that members actively refer business.

Be critical when evaluating if the group can deliver what you want. Are you really going to get the kind of **small business help** that you need from this group? Or do you need to keep looking? Is the group likely to be around long enough for you to benefit? Your time is precious, spend it where it will do you the most good.

Ask for references before joining. Find out what the members are like before you make a long term commitment. Have breakfast or lunch with members outside of the organization's meetings. Ask members why they belong, and compare that to your list of requirements.

Meet the organization more than half way. Go to meetings with business cards. Stick your hand out and introduce yourself. Be curious. Learn about the members. Contribute.

Once in, periodically evaluate the cost / payoff ratio. Set a budget for time, effort and dollars. Define what your membership needs to result in, by when. Be sure you can justify the investment, or think about moving on.

Be realistic about timing. One meeting is rarely enough to assess any organization. Think



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about it as forming, storming, norming and performing – the four stages of group development. Forming means you have found the meeting place. You’ve entered the door and are getting through introductions. Sometimes, early on, it’s easier to identify differences between yourself and others. You may see reasons why this group won’t work for you. That’s part of storming. Norming comes next, and is where the rough edges get worn off. You know how things work, the organization knows how you work, and you come together comfortably. Performing comes next and implies that you now can provide for each other. It can take time for both sides to deliver what each other requires. At the same time, trust your instincts every step of the way. If it feels right, keep going, if it doesn’t feel right, consider moving on to check out another group.

Looking for a good book? Try *The Networking Survival Guide: Get The Success You Want By Tapping Into The People You Know*, by Diane Darling.

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