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Networking, One Person at a Time

by Karen Hodges Miller

Social networking websites are all the rage right now. Many business people have listings on LinkedIn, Facebook, or other networking websites.

But all the websites on the Internet cannot replace face-to-face relationships. That's where Business Network International comes in, says Arnold Rosner, co-director of the Mercer County chapter of BNI, the largest referral marketing organization worldwide. There are literally thousands of BNI chapters located in 39 different countries, from Australia to Zimbabwe. Last year total referrals for the entire organization added to up to over \$2 billion in business, according to Rosner, who along with his work for BNI is co-founder of Strand Management Solutions, an almost 30-year-old consulting firm in Princeton Junction.

Referral or word-of-mouth marketing is the basic tenet of BNI. Each member learns as much as possible about the businesses of the other members in the chapter so that he or she can then refer those businesses to their own clients, friends or neighbors.

One person, one profession. "We're a strong contact network as opposed to a casual contact group such as service clubs or chambers of commerce," explains Rosner. That is why each chapter only accepts one person from each profession. "We want the chapter members to really learn about that person's business and feel comfortable referring him or her to others," he adds.

According to the BNI theory, if a group has two plumbers or lawyers or accountants, members would then have to choose which person to refer and it would be more difficult to develop strong relationships within the group. On the other hand, Rosner says, there is no requirement for a member to only refer people to other members in the group. "If your brother-in-law is a plumber and you want to refer a person to him, that's OK, too."

Building relationships. Referral marketing is all about building relationships, and the best way to do that is to meet with people regularly, says Rosner. When people see each other regularly they get to know them and their work. That builds credibility so that members are comfortable making referrals for each other. This is why BNI chapters meet on a weekly basis, and the only hard and fast requirement of every chapter is regular attendance. "You can't be remembered if you aren't participating," is one of his BNI axioms.

Familiarity also brings accountability. "If I bring my mother-in-law's car in to be repaired by the auto mechanic in the group he's going to do a good job because he knows he has to see me every week for breakfast," Rosner says. "He's going to want to make sure his work is top notch."

Finding a chapter. It's not difficult to find a BNI chapter. There are nine in Mercer

County and dozens of other chapters throughout the state. They meet at a variety of locations, Tuesdays through Fridays. Mondays are kept free for regional meetings and educational events. For contact information, see the Business Meetings listings at the end of this article or E-mail arosner@bninj.com.

The one constant is time: each chapter begins its meeting at 7 a.m. "We find that is the best time to produce really successful groups," says Rosner. "People can get together and hold a meeting at 7 a.m., be done by 8:30 a.m., and get to work by 9 a.m. feeling really vibrant and energized."

Dues are \$330 per year, plus some chapters also have small fees to cover breakfast and room rental. Visitors who would like to learn more about a chapter can attend for two meetings before requesting to join a group. An application that includes references must be submitted to the chapter's membership committee for approval. To find out more about the group or locate a chapter check online at www.bninjpa.com.

Building a chapter. Building chapter membership is also an important part of BNI philosophy, says Rosner; the more people in your network, the more people who can refer your business to others. Area chapters average about 18 members, each of whom is encouraged to bring as several visitors each year.

Givers gain. While making referrals is the primary goal of all BNI members, there is no specific requirement for the number of referrals each member must make. The focus is on quality, not quantity. "Givers gain is how I explain it to people," says Rosner. "If you are making the effort and giving referrals to the other members in your group you will receive referrals."

While Rosner is paid a small stipend for his work as a BNI co-director, it is not his fulltime job. He worked in the computer business for a couple of decades before joining BNI in 2002. After graduating from Hunter College with a degree in math and education he was working for the New York Public in 1967 when he was asked to take a computer aptitude test and was one of the first librarians trained there as a computer programmer.

After working in computers for the library and several other organizations, in 1979 he opened his own company, Strand Management Solutions, a web development and database company on Princeton-Hightstown Road. Two years ago he also started a second company, A4B.us (Access for Business), which develops custom solutions to help business track "people, parts, invoices, scheduling or anything else."

The best way to market. Word of mouth is the best way to get clients," says Rosner, "But word of mouth marketing doesn't happen by itself. It needs a vehicle, a system, a place to make it happen. That's what BNI provides."

Joining a BNI group also costs less than almost any other type of advertising, he adds. "One 4x4 ad in almost any newspaper in the country would cost almost as much or more as a year's worth of dues in BNI," he says, "and look at what you get. One day of advertising or a year of developing a network of people who are going to advertise your business for you."