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Picking the purrfect networking group



Benny Sieu

Jane Banks, owner of Critter Sitters, cares for Bob, a client's cat. Banks found the right networking group to suit her needs, PRO Alliances.

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Jane Banks has operated her Milwaukee pet sitting service for 23 years, but she didn't catch on to the power of networking until nearly two years ago.

Banks owns Critter Sitters Inc., a pet sitting service that cares for dogs, cats, birds, fish, reptiles, and other pets. She launched the business out of her home in 1986.

Although Banks has joined various local networking associations over the years, she found it difficult to make the right connections to strengthen her business.

"Some of the groups were very aggressive. It wasn't a good fit for us," Banks said. "It's finding nice people that are doing their business with integrity with not just the bottom-line at stake."

Banks' situation is typical of many entrepreneurs who join networking associations in hopes of getting business but fail to set specific goals as to what they hope to accomplish.

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Benny Sieu

Jane Banks, owner and operator of Critter Sitters Inc., cares for Leo, a ragdoll cat, at an east side home. Banks has found 20 new clients through PRO Alliances.

Bank said her luck changed in 2007 after she joined The Networking Community, which recently changed its name to PRO Alliances, a membership-based referral and resource organization for entrepreneurs and professionals. The organization has more than 100 members, with three groups in Madison and seven in metro Milwaukee.

Through PRO Alliances, Banks met other like-minded entrepreneurs with whom she could share ideas and obtain business advice. What's more, Banks has found 20 new clients through PRO Alliances.

How did she do it? She approached networking from the standpoint of how she could be of value to others rather than the "What's in it for me?" mindset.

"You go into it looking for those people you can refer business to and knowing that down the road it will get reciprocated," she said. "It's a warm and friendly way to do business."

PRO Alliances emphasizes networking techniques and training and encourages members to share best practices.

"We really teach networking and the attitude people should have when they network," says Jeanine Dent, president and CEO of PRO Alliances in Menomonee Falls. "The biggest mistake people make when networking is confusing networking with sales. We train our members to go in and try and find out what they can do to help people."

Get Connected

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Building connections

Nathan Misirian, a Web strategist from Illinois, has found success within the Executive Resource Group, a 15-member network of Milwaukee-area small-business owners who share expertise to enhance professional development and service to their clients.

Misirian owns Autumn Consulting Inc. of Gilberts, Ill., which does Web marketing for businesses and nonprofit organizations. The firm has about 60 clients in Wisconsin. Misirian has been an Executive Resource Group member for five years.

The group has been a godsend for Misirian in finding clients. Thanks to the connections he's built through ERG, Misirian says he easily generates \$100,000 worth of business yearly.

"I would say 80% of the folks in ERG are my clients," he said. "I want to meet people I can personally connect with. At the end of the day, I have a diverse client base, but they all have the same characteristics. I want quality, long-term relationships."

Misirian prefers smaller networking groups such as ERG that have 50 members or fewer because it gives him more opportunity to get to know people. When networking in larger groups, Misirian believes it's important to focus on a select group of people.

"I have an informal checklist of who I'm looking to meet. I want to meet people I can personally connect with," he said. "Is it the right combination where we're not only going to share business with each other, but enjoy doing business with each other?"

Once you've made the connection and before you can focus on getting business, an important step is to build trust. One way Misirian tries to build trust is by helping people to solve tough business problems. It's an important strategy as many businesses grapple with a bad economy.

"In this economy, solving a problem is probably a more effective strategy," Misirian said. "In the long run, it will lead you to the next level."

Tannette Johnson-Elie writes about how small businesses and start-ups are using networking and business associations to tap the expertise needed to grow. She can be reached at (414) 223-5172 or by e-mail at telie@journalsentinel.com.

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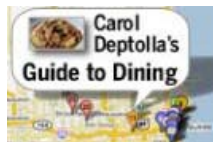
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