New Year's resolution: Learn how to network

By Jim Kendall

Small business

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It may not be at the top of your list of things to accomplish this morning, but bringing more dollars in your business' door likely is on your 2007 to do list.

To do that, be prepared to shake hands and make small talk with more people — new contacts and old — than ever, because you just never know which conversation will lead to new business.

That means you must know how to schmooze, says Mick Carroll — or how to network, says Lillian Bjorseth.

They're both right. Although schmoozing can conjure up caricatures of a used car salesman and networking can bring eye-rolling thoughts of yet another pass-your-business-cards-to-the-left breakfast, Bjorseth and Carroll understand the connections process. Consequently, their ideas can help the rest of us make the positive impressions that can lead to new business.

Carroll is dean of the College of Professional Studies at Aurora University. Bjorseth is president of Duoforce Enterprises in Lisle.

Whether your goal of connecting with more people involves a periodic lunch with regular customers who might make a referral — or who might do more business with you themselves — or a schedule of meet-and-greet business after hours affairs, Bjorseth and Carroll focus on the same techniques.

Their top suggestion: Ask good questions — and listen to the answers.

"You never listen yourself out of a sale," Bjorseth states. "Ask good questions, not ones that can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' but open-ended questions. Then listen to the answer — and respond."

It's when you listen to what your conversation-mate says that you can pick up hints of how your businesses might work together.

Carroll's list of schmoozing tips has a similar focus. "Most people like to respond to good questions," he says. "Ask good questions and listen carefully to the responses. Make good mental notes and determine if there are legitimate reasons for follow-up."

If there are, Carroll continues, "Find a reason to call or send an e-mail. Hopefully, more can develop from this simple contact."

Other ideas from Bjorseth and Carroll:

•"Make (the conversation) about the other person," Bjorseth says. "Most people like to talk about themselves, if you give them a chance."

•“Focus on how you can help the other person — on what you can do for the other party rather than what you can get out of a (conversation),” Carroll suggests. “They’ll like you — and reciprocate.”

•Be yourself. “If you’re not a funny person, don’t try to tell jokes,” advises Carroll.

•Be interesting. “Read magazines, newspaper and books,” Carroll says. “Your hobby can make for a richer conversation rather than all business. This is a subtle way of sharing yourself with someone and (enhancing) a connection. People like to do business with people they like.”

•E-mail questions, comments to Jim Kendall, JKendall@121MarketingResources.com.

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