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News

Entrepreneurs meet to make connections

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AMHERST TOWNSHIP — Business owners working to build up clientele and sales can feel challenged in today's economy, when even long-established companies face declining markets, tightened credit and penny-pinching consumers.

But the Women Business Owners Network, which meets once a month in June, July, August and December, and twice every other month, provides an informal setting for valuable connections for women entrepreneurs in greater Lorain County, with no annual dues.

"Networking is still relevant in the 21st century," said Rene Street, executive director of the American Business Women's Association, based in Kansas City, Mo. "The face-to-face meeting is an essential part of communities, whether you talk about one topic or ten topics. We believe that it's not an Internet world, or a text world, but a world based on face-to-face connections."

Karen Cheshire, a member of Women Business Owners Network, said the group started meeting about 10 years ago. Its Web site lists more than 30 members, although about 10 usually show up for the dinner meetings at restaurants, Cheshire said. She works for J&R Moving & Storage, of South Amherst. The company is an agent for National Van Lines, a woman-owned business.

At WBON meetings, members offer a 30-second promotion of the goods and services they offer, and one member is given 15 minutes to go into greater depth about her company and herself. Guest speakers enliven the mix, covering topics from the Lorain County Metro Parks to business coaches and personal trainers.

Nancy Daniel, of Bay Village, has been a member of WBON for three years. The name of her financial brokerage company, Crescendo Finance, reflects her other vocation, as a substitute violinist for the Cleveland Orchestra. She attended the Sept. 17 meeting at Mutt & Jeff's restaurant at Dragon Ranch Golf Club.

"The women here are diverse," she said, about the network members. "They're committed to growing their companies and I have a lot of respect for them. I have attempted to do business with most of the women at this table."

Julie DiFilippo, an independent ball room dance instructor, lives in Westlake but teaches all over Lorain County and western Cuyahoga County. She has taught classes for wedding parties, public schools and scouting groups.

"I joined WBON a few months ago," she said. "It's not a traditional networking group, where you're required to bring a certain number of potential members. It's very relaxed. I've tried other groups and this one is the best."

Susan Dunn, of Elyria, became a Tupperware consultant about two years ago when she was forced into early retirement

by Windstream Corp. after working for Windstream and Alltel for almost 32 years, she said. She joined WBON shortly after the transition. Dunn sells Tupperware at monthly bingo games in Sheffield Lake, Sandusky, Cleveland and elsewhere, and at in-home parties, craft shows and online.

"I try to get to as many (WBON) meetings as I can," she said. "It's a helpful networking group. We have people who do home improvements, cook meals or do accounting. I also like the guest speakers, because I always learn from them. The group has been really beneficial to me."

Carla Harbert is a real estate agent for Re/Max Pros, of Westlake and has been a member of WBON for almost two years.

"It's a great way to meet people and share ideas," Harbert said. "When you get to know people, you help each other out. It's very productive, and I have gotten business from being a member."

Brenda Van Dress, of Amherst, is an independent representative for Wildtree Herbs Inc. which sells natural food products, including packaged mixes and spices, in Asian, Mexican, American and Italian cuisines. She also works as a nurse.

Van Dress joined WBON about two years ago, when she lived in Elyria after moving from Michigan.

"I wanted to have some connections made when I came to Elyria," she said. "I like the informal nature of the group. It's worked out well and I have done business with the members."

Lori Mitchell, of Amherst, joined WBON about 18 months ago. Her company, Simple Home Designs, offers interior design and home staging, to make homes for sale more attractive to potential buyers.

"It's a good way to get my name out there," she said. "Most of my business is through referrals or word-of-mouth."

Krista Gable, of Amherst, is the owner of Notary Eagle Professional Services, which offers virtual assistant services to companies through the Internet. Gable worked for National City Bank until being laid off in 2005. She spent 21½ years looking for work and finally started Notary Eagle Professional Services. She has been a member of WBON since 2007. Her membership has been a big benefit to her business, she said.

"We're on a journey," she said.

Dr. Jennifer Robb, a Lorain dentist, has been a member for about four years. "I get a lot of business insight from the other members," she said. "They offer the kind of information and tips I didn't get in dental school. We all try to refer business to each other."

For more information on the Women Business Owners Network, visit www.womenbusinessownersnetwork.com or call 986-3200 or 985-2570.

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