

# Ideas, information flow through networks

**Sat Aug 26 2006**

*Small Business Clinic / Murray McNeill*

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TRAINING specialist Brenda Oliver doesn't have to be sold on the benefits of networking.

The owner and founder of Winnipeg-based Oliver Leadership Inc. thought it was so important that three years ago she set up an Internet-based international networking and mentoring group for women called The Country Club -- Distinctive Voices, Dynamic Women.

Accessible through her company website ([www.brendaoliver.com](http://www.brendaoliver.com)), the club boasts more than 125 members from around the world, most of whom are entrepreneurs and business executives. It provides members with an online venue for exchanging information, experiences, ideas and advice, and developing new business opportunities.

It also was through her networking with other women that Oliver recently received an invitation to speak at an international women's networking conference next month in Rome. Her appearance there could do wonders for her consulting business, which specializes in providing emotional intelligence training for businesses and professionals.

"We're going to get international exposure and this also launches me as an international speaker," Oliver said in an interview.

The Women's Enterprise Centre of Manitoba is another big proponent of using networking as a tool for developing new business opportunities and enhancing the personal development of business owners.

Not only does the WEC make networking an integral part of its business seminars, but it recently launched an online business directory for women that provide them with a means of connecting with other female entrepreneurs in the province. There are already more than 200 names in the directory, and Mary Jane Loustel, the WEC's chief executive officer, said the goal is to have at least 800 by the end of next March.

So with all of this emphasis on the importance of networking, the next question is: How to you go about doing it?

## THE INDUSTRY

Business-related training and development is a large and fiercely competitive industry, and Brenda Oliver tries to differentiate her company from the competition by focusing on a specialized niche within that industry -- emotional intelligence training.

An accredited emotional intelligence training specialist, Oliver essentially teaches business executives and professionals how to handle their emotions and express their feelings appropriately and effectively.

"A lot of people sit there wondering why they never get promoted when they have all the skills," she said. "But maybe it's because of the way they are perceived by others."

She said while other local firms offer emotional intelligence training, her company is the only one that focuses exclusively on that. As a result, she is recognized as one of Canada's experts on emotional intelligence training and the impact of emotions on performance, she added.

## THE ENTREPRENEUR

Oliver launched Oliver Leadership Inc. in 2003 after a 20-year career with American Express, most recently as its director of sales and relationship management for Western Canada.

Her husband, Wayne, who is an airline industry consultant, helps her out with the firm's accounting and bookkeeping chores. Oliver focuses on running the company, developing and delivering training programs, speaking at conferences and conventions, and overseeing the firm's The Country Club network.

Any other specialized services the business requires -- things like printing and graphic design work -- are contracted out to outside experts.

## THE SOLUTION

Loustel said it's not only important to network, it's important for entrepreneurs to include a networking plan within their overall business plan. That way they can identify the kind of networking initiatives that will produce the best results for them and their businesses.

"It shouldn't be ad hoc. It needs to be focused," she said, noting there are different groups you may want to network with, including prospective clients, suppliers, mentors, and other businesses within your industry or neighbourhood.

If you want to network with business people in general, the Chamber of Commerce is a good place to start, Loustel said. Other possibilities are the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and the Women Business Owners of Manitoba.

Industry and professional associations are also good vehicles for networking within your industry or profession, while joining your local Business Improvement Zone group or community club can be effective ways of connecting with others in your neighbourhood.

Loustel said while some of your networking efforts should be targeted; there are also numerous opportunities for doing more informal kinds of networking.

"Networking can happen anywhere. It can happen while you're standing on the sidelines watching your son or daughter play soccer, or it can happen when you're standing in line at Starbucks."

With the shift in recent years to a more global economy, Loustel said it's also important not to limit your networking to your local community, especially if your business is export oriented.

"Now you have to think in terms of your community, city, province and internationally."

Attending business events such as conferences and trade shows is a good way of meeting people from outside your community. Oliver said it was a woman she met at a conference last year in Mexico City who recommended she be invited to speak at next month's conference in Rome.

The Internet, and Internet-based networking groups such as Oliver's The Country Club, is another. But Oliver cautioned against relying on that as your sole means of networking.

"You still have to get out and about," she said. "You have to get out and talk to people."

Loustel said you also have to be careful not to overextend yourself by spending too much time on networking and not enough time on looking after your business. Or taking on more networking-related commitments than you can handle.

"You have to be able to deliver (on your promises) or you'll be disappointing other people," which could damage your reputation and your business in the long run, she said.

[murray.mcneill@freepress.mb.ca](mailto:murray.mcneill@freepress.mb.ca)