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Business Times Dispatch

During the three-day business advisory breakfast meeting, participants were able to get answers to their questions about the work

Need for speed
Women in business taking advantage of networking in a hurry
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Quick connections

Speed events take some of the work out of networking

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Someone clinks a water glass with a metal fork, and 36 women take seats at six tables.

Some finish munching on breakfast from the pre-networking buffet while others take out stacks of business cards, pads of paper and pens to take notes. It's just after 8 a.m.

There's a quick rundown of the rules: You have 10 minutes to talk to the other five women at your table. Introductions should be 35-40 seconds. When the bell rings, go to the table that matches the next number listed on your nametag. You have 35 seconds to move. Repeat.

"So, are you ready to build?" asks the moderator standing at the front of the room. She reaches over to the podium and taps the orange bell.

And they're off.

It's Speed Power Networking, and the business cards are flying.

Most of the women gathered in the 24th-floor executive dining room of SunTrust Bank this July morning belong to the River City Express Network, the women's networking group hosting the event. And many of them belong to several other Richmond-area networking groups exclusively for women.

The concept of networking -- and of gender-specific networking opportunities -- has been gaining momentum in the past several years, inspired by the quick connections made possible by the Internet. Independent, women-only networking groups have taken root in Richmond, and businesses and law firms have created their own women's initiatives.

In a society where it's all about whom you know, gender-specific events are addressing the fact that men and women communicate differently.

The women at Table No. 1 have made it through almost all of their introductions.

"I must have done too many of these meetings," says Kelli Volosevich, membership director of the Bull & Bear Club in Richmond, as she passes out her business card. She laughs. "I've got this spiel down to 30 seconds."

The bell rings.

"You've got one minute," shouts Angie Fritter, a vice president of the Express Network, from the front of the room.

"Hello, my name is Sandra Sylv . . . "

The bell rings again, cutting off Sandra Sylvester, owner of Superior Expressions, a company in Midlothian that sells educational materials. She quickly fans her business cards on the table before the women get up and hustle to their second tables.

Women's networking groups have existed since the 1940s. At least nine exist in the Richmond area today, according to the Richmond Women's Business Consortium, a group that links the different women's organizations as an alliance.

Businesses such as SunTrust, Wachovia and law firms Hirschler Fleischer and McGuireWoods also have created networking groups for women who are, as Jan Thomas says, "starved for a forum." Thomas leads the Women's Initiatives Network at Hirschler Fleischer.

All of these groups have shifted to address the need for quick networking.

The American Business Women's Association, which started in 1949 and works in local chapters, noticed a drop in membership about 10 years ago.

"Professional women seemed to be having less time," said Marianne Lawrence, a director of the Express Network. "A lot of local groups were having a hard time attracting new members."

Events typically viewed as networking opportunities, such as playing a round of golf or going to a sporting event, took too much time.

"That's a huge time commitment, and a lot of women don't have time to do that," McGuireWoods partner Anne McCray said at an all-women's networking luncheon held by the law firm last month. "With events like this, women can get together, get something out of it and then get back to work."

The American Business Women's Association launched its first affiliated "express network" -- a group with shorter meetings, more programs and more opportunities to focus solely on networking -- in Texas in 1998. The Richmond chapter, River City Express Network, was chartered with 52 members in 2001. Membership has grown to about 100-125 in the past six years.

The other women's groups in Richmond also have reported an increase in membership after developing quick-networking events.

"The old way of doing things just didn't work," said Smokie Sizemore, a vice president of the Express Network. "This was a new way to keep up with the times."

If networking events like this are fast-paced and gender-specific, do the women benefit?

Participants and Virginia Commonwealth University sociologist Jennifer Johnson say yes.

"I always leave these events energetic and motivated," said Vickie Griffith, who started BreakThrough, a company in western Henrico County that promotes well-being in the workplace. "It's uplifting. I feel inspired."

Johnson said groups and events just for women address how the sexes network differently. Women seek a more homogenous network and want more intimate ties.

Many women at the speed networking event said they feel more comfortable networking with other women. Lisa Ritchie already belonged to several networking groups in the area, but she joined the River City Express Network two years ago because it was gender-specific.

"We all understand each other and we all face the same issues," said Ritchie, president of Capital City SuperCoups, an advertising company in Midlothian.

Men tend to have more connections than women with people higher up the professional ladder, Johnson said, and they may be able to mobilize themselves to better positions.

For this reason, Johnson said women need to evaluate what they want to get out of networking events. Women can find personal support by meeting with women who are like them, or they can advance careers by networking with people who are different.

"It's important that women pay attention to professional networking because life often takes them out of professional networks," she said. Networking groups "can bring a diverse group of women together. You can connect with people across many different social, racial, educational levels. If you can make connections with women who are different in a vertical way, those types of ties can help you out a lot."

Lawrence said diversity is a selling point for the group. It includes business owners and vice presidents, women just entering business and some who have already retired.

Laila Marshall said the Speed Power Networking event allowed her to get support from other female business owners and tap into the diversity. This was her second time going to an Express Network event, and she met and exchanged cards with 15 people by the end of the morning.

"You get to promote your business, practice promoting your business and hear ideas you've never heard of before," said Marshall at the recent event. She is the owner of My Girlfriend's Kitchen, a franchise that prepares easy-to-cook meals, in western Henrico County.

And connections made in networking groups don't end there. Networkers may run into the same people at group meetings, but the "who-you-know" spreads even after the final bell rings.

"When you like someone, you just end up bringing them up in conversations with other people," said Mary Foley, member of the Express Network and president of her own company, Bodacious! Ventures, in Richmond. "Our networks expand far beyond this room."

The women have switched tables three times when Angie Fritter taps the orange bell for the final time. It's just before 9 a.m. The work day hasn't even started yet, and the women already have made new contacts with people they might not run into had they not come to the event.

At Table No. 2, a teacher offering a tutorial service, a hypnotist, an analyst for SunTrust Bank and a public relations officer for Habitat for Humanity pack up their notebooks and new business cards as they talk about another woman whose business prepares food for company luncheons.

"When you're thinking, 'I've been looking for someone that does that,' this takes a lot of steps out of that research," Habitat representative Lisa Bedell says.

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