

Networking gives power to the people

Being good at what you do is no longer enough, **Sue Williams** discovers. You have to get out there and party with your peers to win those orders.

It's early evening in a bar in Sydney, and the drinks, conversation and bonhomie are flowing. Yet behind the good-natured social chat, serious business is being done. In one corner, a man is trying to sell insurance to new design company founder Michael Drummond; in another, someone's talking website solutions to the marketing director of a large corporation.

By the end of the evening, the website entrepreneur has an appointment to pitch formally to the corporation the next week and, two days later, the financial consultant, his insurance still unsold, phones Drummond. "We've got a rush job that needs to be done," he says, cheerfully. "We need to put an ad in a program that's being finalised — could you do it for me?"

Good networking has always been an important component in the success of any business, but it's never been so efficiently structured, well-ordered, earnest and critical as it is today. Fifty years ago it was done informally within the confines of old boys' networks and clubs. Thirty years ago Rotary and Lions clubs put a charitable face on blokes blathering about business. These days it's no longer enough simply being good at your profession or trade; you've now got to get out there and party with your peers and their bosses in order to win orders.

Now, most evenings of the week in any of Australia's cities, there are gatherings of specially designed networking groups, set up with the express intention of getting people together to make contacts, hear about movements in the market and, ultimately, do business with each other.

For Drummond, the amount of time he's spending at these social gatherings, talking about his company, KM Creative, and its speciality in designing business media solutions via advertising, branding and printing, has come as a revelation. Currently, he gives one or two evenings a week over to such groups, resisting the temptation to network five nights a week and spread himself too thinly.

"It's a sacrifice of your personal time, but in the first stages of a new business, you need to live and breathe it," says Drummond, 28, who quit his career in the pharmaceuticals industry to work on the development side of his own business, with partner designer Kerry Dawson, 34. "And you soon realise how valuable these networking groups are to a new business, particularly smaller companies."

"You can show people your work and your portfolio, but it's usually your personality that judges you on. Everyone wants to do business with someone who's good, of course, but if they've also met, got to know and like you, then that can win you the work."

It's an ethos that's seen a veritable explosion in the number of networking groups around the country. Kimberley Palmer, who four years ago set up the young communications professionals group NETWORKX, which now has more than 3000 people on its Sydney and Melbourne database, believes Australia is primarily about service-based industries, so that face-to-face contact is vital.

"It's hard to advertise or do direct marketing about a service," she says. "That's often not effective. It's more about the person who's delivering it. Networking isn't a dirty



The buzz of business . . . lunchtime networkers hard at work at the Westin Sydney hotel.

Photo: TANYA LAKE

word any more, either. People are more career-minded, are single for longer and aren't rushing home to families, and they don't think of it as using other people. It's now acceptable and seen as a way people meet each other, both socially and for work.

"It's so much easier to meet people over a few drinks in an atmosphere that gives you permission to ask them what they do, and what they can do for you, than do the cold sell."

In an economic climate where many small businesses simply can't afford big marketing or advertising budgets, networking groups also provide a cheaper way of making contacts and, with many organising regular speakers and workshops on business development, they're increasingly viewed as filling the gaps left by corporate cutbacks on training and education.

Many of the professional bodies, like the Australian Marketing Institute, offer networking opportunities, but there seems to be an increasing eagerness to meet a broader range of people, from both small companies and big corporations, in less formal, much more social, early evening gatherings.

Carolyn Stafford, the co-founder of a networking organisation, Connect, sees the rapid rise in the number of groups around as symptomatic of a time-poor, more fragmented social structure. "There's a sense of a lack of connectedness among people, and they're

looking outside the groups they would normally link up with," she says. "People make wonderful friends, as well as doing business."

Small business operators particularly love the groups as a counter to their isolation, and a way of sharing experiences, resources and support. Often the people who come along start forming new business teams, to provide each other with complementary services. Recently, for instance, a group within Connect has set up Highway 101, offering financial services. "It's great for forming

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alliances," Stafford says. "You can pick and choose those individuals you've got to know and would like to work with."

Paul Jones is a good example. As a copywriter working from home, he found himself without the internal supports you'd normally find within a big company, and with no one to bounce ideas off. He missed the office watercooler. Eighteen months ago he invited five friends to meet him in a pub near his Sydney home and called it the Last Friday Club. It's now evolved into the Last Thursday

Club — a much better evening, he's found — with a regular gathering of 100-120 people.

He's worked hard to make it feel social, with door prizes donated by attendees, like the use of their services, and events, but there's always a serious message beneath. Ten-minute sessions where people have to introduce themselves to someone they've never met before and swap cards, and a table at the front covered with promotional literature from businesses represented keep them all focused.

"People meet you and like you, which is the key to good business," Jones says. "It's often not the best person for the job who gets it, but the person someone feels an affinity for and trusts. It's always been the same in business."

Even at the highest level, there's a need to provide formal networking opportunities. Andrew Dalziel, chief executive of the 600-member CEO Institute, says even those at the top can feel isolated. "A CEO might have friends in senior positions, but they might not know other CEOs to share experiences and ideas with," he says.

Those kind of strategic alliances, at the end of the day, are valuable for every kind of sector of society. At the Women's Planning Network, women get together because there are simply few women in the profession and they need a peer group, says president Lecki Ord. At Fruits In Suits gatherings, gay and lesbian professionals also do business.

Global networking specialist Robyn Henderson, the author of six books on the subject, says networking becomes more vital the more competitors there are in the market, with technology, direct marketing and an increasing number of small businesses all piling on the pressure.

Good networkers follow some basic rules, however. They have to forget childhood advice of not talking to strangers, they have to learn not to be intimidated by people they perceive to be senior to them, they have to focus on the person they're talking to and be an active listener and, in order to work confidently in networking groups, they should pretend they're the host, which will immediately make them look more assured. Preparing a few questions and conversation-starters is no bad thing, either.

"It's about the insularity of society," says Henderson. "People are looking for a tribe to belong to. They work long hours, they're stressed and lack balance, and email has replaced talking to people. They even have lunch at their computer terminals. Networking is a way of sharing wisdom and building bonds."

Yet while networking can work well for business, there can be a downside. Drummond, for instance, has seen people "working the crowd" too fiercely, and thus alienating potential contacts. He's also been in the position of being unable to extricate himself from the person who wants to take up the whole evening with one conversation. And, of course, in situations where the alcohol flows, there is always the danger of someone getting drunk, aggressive or inappropriately amorous, and putting off everyone.

"Usually, though, networking can be extremely valuable in all the relationships you build," Drummond says. "You have to look at it as a long-term project, and it can really bring rewards."