

BUSINESS REVIEW

Western Michigan

Business Intelligence |

Networking rethink: 'What can I do for you?'

I have had the opportunity throughout my career to work for organizations both large and small, for-profit and not-for-profit, start-ups and well-established. One of the tools I have found invaluable as a woman in business has been the effective use of networking.

Sometimes women look at networking as a meet-and-greet event, an opportunity to acquaint others with their experience and value or as a business development or sales meeting. While I agree that some or many of these outcomes may result, for me networking has a totally different goal. It is not focused on me and what I can get out of the encounter.

My networking approach is one that I'll call the Good Ol' Boys method, or GOB. This type of networking seeks to connect the right people with the right people, the right people with the right organizations or the right people with the information or technology they seek.

Personal gain, for me, is way down the list. I have always tried to make introductions and suggestions or share information that would benefit the person with whom I am

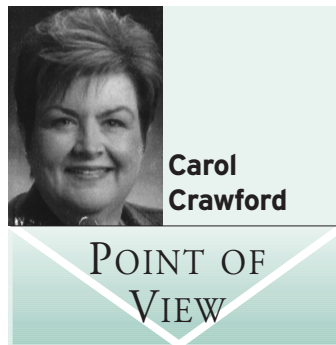
networking. I think that one of the greatest values a woman in business can bring is who she knows and what she knows.

I believe that businessmen have known this and practiced the GOB approach for many, many years. They have been willing to share contacts and information without immediate personal gain. They have made it their business to listen to people and conversations, retaining information that may be beneficial for others. Their networking involves conversations that uncover needs, desires and goals.

They then suggest other contacts to make, companies to investigate or ideas to consider. They recognize that by providing value for the other person, they are benefiting themselves. By focusing on what you can do for the other person instead of selling yourself, you open the doors for many future business opportunities.

The business opportunity or sale may not come today or next week, but you have made a connection that is strong.

I recognize that to be successful at any type of networking one must first have



some level of comfort with putting oneself out there. The idea of walking into a room of strangers and attempting to make contact is, for many people, worse than a visit to the dentist. Will anyone talk to me, do I walk up to a group and try to gain entry, do I head for the food/beverages, how soon can I make my escape?

However, by changing our focus from, "What will I achieve for me or my business?" to "What are your interests, what are your needs and what can I do for you?," the pressure seems less. I do not have to sell myself to you, but, instead, I am interested in you — no personal gain is sought.

Women can add value through the GOB process simply by asking about challenges others are facing today. Think about how often it is

easy to come up with ideas and suggestions that address the problems of others.

The answers seem so clear to us, primarily because we are not involved. We have nothing to gain or lose by our suggestions, so many of the mental roadblocks that face others are not there as we consider their issues.

Ultimately what goes around comes around, and you reap the benefits of your GOB networking. People remember you and what you provided for them.

These same people make it their business to know what you and your company do, and referrals and contacts often result. You accomplish your original networking goal of increasing visibility, making new business contacts and maybe even gaining new business but in a manner that has everyone saying, "Thank you."

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