

Economy spurs networking events

By Dominick Tao, Times Staff Writer

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For an increasing number in Tampa Bay's business community, simply talking to other professionals has become the last, best way to wring employment from a stingy economy, or snatch that last ripe sales lead from a shy market.

And the organizations that facilitate the talking — networking groups and referral services — are experiencing double-digit growth as a result, with some reporting attendance at meetings has jumped as much as much as 40 percent in recent months.

Just ask Tom Fleming, the regional director of Business Network International, a worldwide referral organization.

"The applicant increase has been so big, we're looking to start another five or six chapters in the bay area between now and the end of the year," Fleming said.

New membership inquiries for BNI's Tampa Bay chapters have increased by about 25 percent this year, with many calls coming from Realtors and mortgage lenders — a telltale sign of why networking groups are seeing such a boom in popularity.

"Before, people could stand under the tree and wait for the apple to hit them on the head. Now, people need to climb the tree and take the apple," Fleming said. "As business has dropped off, they're looking for more proactive ways to get business."

While BNI offers a direct way for professionals to connect, its \$300 annual membership fee and other rules, such as only one person per profession in each chapter, can be prohibitive.

And that's where less rigid networking groups, like Free Networking International, come into play. That group, with about 6,000 participants in Central Florida, hosts weekly events like "speed networking"— similar to speed dating, but with business cards. The group's founder, David Doerges, said the idea is to make organized business networking "a cool thing to do," not just for salesmen and executive types.

In a private room of Ferg's Sports Bar near downtown St. Petersburg on Tuesday night, FNI networking coach Carol Hasbrouck eyes her stopwatch, a minute's worth of mingling time ticking away.

A beer-sipping bevy of salesmen and small-business owners and account executives shuffle business cards and smile and try to make an impression on the other entrepreneur types at their numbered tables.

For participants like Carl Babcock, a service adviser with ABC Pest Control, a night spent speed networking is a night well spent.

"I could either sit here with 15 people, or I could knock on 15 doors," Babcock said. "And here, there's food."

For 23-year-old Kyle Murray, just getting his feet wet in the real estate business, meeting new people seems to be his best bet in a tanking housing market.

"It's pretty vital," he said. "It opens the door — I just need to walk through it correctly."

And for the unemployed, networking meetings offered by nonprofit groups like the Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance can do things typical unemployment resources can't.

For Melody Tapley, that means getting hired.

When the 46-year-old lost her insurance company job in May, she launched a multipronged hunt for work.

There were the career finder Web sites. The temp agencies. The job fairs. All of it, she says, a waste of time.

"Especially those job fairs —they are a joke," Tapley said. "All you do is stand in line for 15 minutes to hear, 'you can go online to fill out an application, but we're not hiring.' "

Then she discovered the Alliance's networking group. After a few weekly meetings, she had connected with a marketing job for a commercial cleaning company.

If it weren't for tips from the program staff and trading ideas with other members, Tapley says she would likely still be looking for work.

Alfredia Mulkey, the Alliance's networking director, said in recent months attendance at her Monday networking session has swollen from 30 to more than 50.

And networking groups for companies, chambers of commerce and industry associations, are upping the ante.

The Tampa Bay Technology Forum, the area's largest tech company association, is expecting its annual Tech Jam fundraiser Thursday to be the largest yet.

Amy Norman, the forum's president, predicts the event will top last year's attendance of about 1,000 — both because Sister Hazel is the lead act and because opportunities to interact with other industry professionals will abound.

"It's good business development," Norman said. "And if someone's with one company, they want to be connected so they can join another if they need to."

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Upcoming events:

Tampa Bay Technology Forum's Tech Jam Fundraiser: Featuring Sister Hazel. Thursday, 6 p.m., St. Pete Times Forum. \$35 for members, \$50 at the door.

Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance Networking Group:

9215 N Florida Avenue; Tampa, Florida. Mondays, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Free.

Free Networking International: Speed Networking After Hours. Sept. 15, 5:30 p.m. 32888 U.S. 19 N, Palm Harbor. \$10.

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