



Focus on networking

Many of the delegates attending PCG's Smarter Freelancing seminars and various co-hosted events earlier this year wanted to know more about networking for better business.

PCG itself has a role to play as a networking group, and its activities complement those of other networking organisations in the UK.

Word-of-mouth or referral marketing can be a wonderful source of new business, particularly for small companies, and listed here, in alphabetical order, are details of some of the better-known networking organisations. Each has its own *modus operandi*, and may differ between chapters or branches. Before deciding which to join, it is a good idea to attend a couple of meetings as a guest.

Business Networking International (BNI)

An international organisation with over 2,700 chapters worldwide. Weekly breakfast meetings must be attended or a substitute sent, and members are required to bring referrals and/or visitors. Joining fee £80 and annual subscription £320, plus weekly meeting fees. www.bni-europe.com

Business Referral Exchange (BRE)

A UK contact network of trade and professional people who meet weekly and whose aim is to generate qualified business leads for each other. Members are encouraged to bring visitors and expected to provide referrals. Joining fee £100 and annual membership fee of £250 plus weekly meeting fees. www.brenet.co.uk

Chamber of Commerce

A national network of quality-accredited chambers that host various networking events and allow members to promote their businesses on the local Chamber websites. Membership fees vary, but expect to pay around £130 as a sole trader, plus charges for specific events. www.chamberonline.co.uk

Ecademy

Primarily an online networking portal, Ecademy's stated aim is "to build the world's largest Trusted Business Network by connecting people to one another - enabling knowledge, contacts and opportunities to be shared for World Wide Wealth." Membership is free, with the option to upgrade to the Power Networker category for £100. www.ecademy.com

Institute of Directors (IoD)

A non party-political organisation founded by Royal Charter in 1903, the IoD has around

55,000 members whose views it represents. It provides support for the professional development of directors, and hosts regular seminars and events in 13 regions around the country. One-time election fee of £200 and annual membership fee of £240.

www.iod.co.uk

Refer-on

UK business referral organisation offering networking opportunities through weekly meeting and various formal and social gatherings and functions. Operates in London and the South East, North of England and Scotland. Joining fee £130 and annual fee of £295. www.refer-on.com

Rotary

A worldwide organisation of business and professional leaders whose aim is to provide humanitarian service, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world. Networking for business purposes is a by-product rather than a primary aim of membership, which is strictly by invitation. Members are expected to commit to weekly meetings and project participation. Average subscription around £75 plus cost of weekly meeting. www.rotary.org

Other organisations worth investigating are: Aurora Women's Network at www.busygirl.com Lions Club at www.lions.org.uk Toastmasters at www.toastmasters.org Wired Berkshire at www.wiredberkshire.com

Prices are quoted exclusive of VAT, for indicative purposes only. Please check with the organisations concerned for accurate pricing information.

Beyond referrals



Self-employed sports injury therapist Maggie Allen has over eight years'

experience in assessing and treating sports injuries and low back pain. A keen athlete, her aim is to provide her clients with safe, effective, holistic and scientific treatment that encourages them to take an active role in their healthcare.

Maggie is passionate about her BNI membership, and her investment in networking extends way beyond the weekly breakfast meetings. "It's not so much about getting business referrals and income for myself," she says, "nor is it about doing the bare minimum to get by. I find the group very motivating, and have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know about and promoting their businesses. We are all in the same boat, professional people trying to grow our enterprises, and we look out for each other."

Maggie found the Networking Skills workshop that she attended earlier this year very positive. "It was truly inspiring," she enthuses, "and I have learned to think outside the group and acquire the confidence to expand my networking activities into other areas. I contacted some other local practitioners, and ended up developing a very good working

relationship with a chiropractor, which in turn led to my finding the ideal premises for my Notting Hill practice.

"For me, as a self-employed person, being able to exchange ideas and problems with like-minded people is a real boon," continues Maggie. "Most of the people in my BNI chapter are really sincere, and we have become good friends. If any of us were going through a hard patch, the others would rally to provide moral support and help."

Maggie admits that she did not like the early morning starts when she first joined BNI, but now she really looks forward to each meeting. "I belong to a team," she says, "and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

For further information see

www.maggiellen.com and www.bni-europe.com

Networking works



Fred Weil is a computer professional who has been contracting since January 1995. He was one of the first members

to join PCG back in 1999, and has been a BRE member for four years. His company, Info IQ, specialises in website development and e-commerce systems.

A fellow member at the St Albans chapter of BRE is Julian Gilbert, managing director of Wealth Matters, an independent financial consultancy. So impressed was he with work that Info IQ had undertaken for his two company websites that he commissioned their help with another, more personal, project.

Julian had invested in Gorse Cottage, a holiday home in the New Forest. With it, he inherited a substandard website, which was failing to

sell the property. The photo collection took 20 minutes to download - an instant turn off for prospective clients.

Armed with a simple brief to revamp the site to raise its profile and attract more business, Info IQ set about effecting the transformation. Photos were converted to easily downloadable formats, to enhance the visual experience. A simple content management system was implemented, which allowed Julian to update his site regularly and actively promote it to entice new visitors.

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Phase two brought a new style, as well as detailed maps of the area and a useful links page. Phase three, planned for the autumn, will introduce a booking system that will accept credit card payments.

The new website soon brought in bookings from around the world, equating to over

£4,000 in revenue, and Julian is delighted. "Info IQ is one of the best suppliers I have worked with; they have supplied me with three good working websites."

Fred, in turn, is very pleased with the amount of business that he generates through his networking activities. "BRE has been a very good source of business for me," he says. "Like any organisation of this type, it is only as good as the group to which you belong. To work properly, it requires commitment from all the members, and our committee keeps a very sharp look out for weak performers and those who don't attend regularly."

"The other benefit of BRE is the mutual support. If you are just starting out, there is a wealth of experience available for you to tap into. I use the printer, the printer consumables supplier, the marketing people and the business development people. This is not out of blind loyalty to the group - they are all good and competitive."

Introductions from an Institute of Directors (IoD) networking group have also resulted in two projects for Info IQ. "This is work that my company would not otherwise have known about," says Fred. "Networking works."

For further information see

www.infoiq.co.uk, www.gorsecottage.co.uk and www.brenet.co.uk