

Altruistic Networking

I've started to see a different message in networking articles lately. The shift seems to be moving away from focusing solely on finding business, and more on finding opportunities to help others out.

As a Life Coach, I've felt compelled to explore this rather paradoxical suggestion. A lot of the work I do with clients is about helping them shake off their conventional ways of doing things to see beyond their usual playing field. Like the movie "Pay it Forward," doing something for someone else without conditions sounded like a pretty radical shift.

An opportunity to join a networking organization that professes to embody this type of thinking fell into my lap six months ago. Business Networking International (BNI) promotes something called "Giver's Gain."

My first thought upon arriving at the meeting was, "how do people have so much energy at 6:45 in the morning?!" Right off the bat, everyone was given 60 seconds to stand up and "pitch" their business. My "infomercial" attempt sounded rusty and stale and I immediately saw the potential for honing a killer elevator speech.

The meeting continued at a brisk pace, and just before the end, everyone took turns standing up again and passing business referrals to each other. The energy in the room went up several notches. This was "Giver's Gain" in action. Every member is required to bring four referrals each month and not just any old referral. To be considered legitimate, a referral must have a budget, intent and immediate need attached.

I learned that the more referrals you pass to other members, the harder they work to find referrals for you—"you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." Members certainly seemed to be focused on helping each other out, but there was an obligatory kind of tone afoot and I got the sense that members were feeling pressure to perform. As a life coach, I've learned that long-term motivation comes from doing things because you want to and not because you have to.

As a relatively new business, my concerns were eclipsed by my need for sales, and I signed up with BNI. Since January, I have invested \$700 and approximately sixty hours, and closed \$4,300 in business.

For finding new business, BNI was an effective vehicle. The infomercial practice and efficient business-like agenda keep me toned and ready for the corporate world. Perhaps I hadn't exactly stumbled across the networking "garden of Eden" just yet, but I would be remiss if I didn't say that it was exactly the kind of support my new business needed.