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Going Strong After 9 Years, \$2 Million-Plus in Referrals: Business Group Hosts April 12 Visitors' Day



By Inside Edge PR Community Member March 29 at 11:09 p.m.



About 100 people attended last year's Visitors' Day, hosted by OPRF Partners of BNI at the River Forest Community Center.

When the economy soured a few years ago, there was at least one group of local people who weathered the financial storm thanks largely to a foundation they had been laying for years.

Dubbed OPRF Partners of BNI, the group has developed a system of business referrals that is built on mutual trust, respect and awareness of each other's service and product offerings.

Comprised of about 30 local business owners and entrepreneurs, since 2002 the group has flourished as one of the foremost business-referral groups in the region.

Operating under the auspices of Business Network International (BNI), OPRF Partners' members generate leads for one another that easily surpass \$275,000 annually in cumulative income.

If you are a business owner or are responsible for your own sales, you are invited to join the group on Tuesday, April 12 as it hosts a Visitors' Day at the River Forest Community Center, 8020 Madison St. The event, which goes from 7:15 a.m. to 8:45 a.m., extends an invitation to local businesses, from solo practitioners to multi-million-dollar firms, to explore whether the proven marketing approach is a fit for them.

In northern Illinois, there are about 80 chapters and 1,800 members, said Tom Gosche, regional director of BNI for the past five years and involved with the organization for the past 12 years. OPRF Partners perennially has been one of the successful chapters in northern Illinois, he said.

"The relationships built in the chapter are among the strongest we've had in the region," Gosche said. "BNI chapters are the most cost-efficient way to increase your business."

The group offers exclusivity to its members—only one individual per profession can be a member, preventing a conflict. Currently, among the professionals sought by the group are a graphic/web designer, a fitness/personal trainer, a wedding/event planner, a mover, an organizer, a caterer and a plumber.

The benefits go beyond receiving business referrals: among other positives, members help each other solve challenges in their day-to-day operations and tap into a network of trusted professionals whom they use for their own needs.

Each 90-minute session follows a structure format, with each member delivering a roughly one-minute presentation about his or her business, a featured 10-minute speaker and a phase toward meeting's end when members give and receive referrals and testimonials.

Over the years, OPRF Partners of BNI has drawn from a wide range of disciplines, including attorneys, a dentist, a chiropractor, an acupuncturist and an audiologist among its ranks. Others in the group currently include a massage therapist, a nutrition supplement consultant, an accountant, a building contractor, a health insurance agent and an architect.

Ron Krause of River Forest, a financial planner, joined the group in February 2003, when it was only a year old and he had formed his business only a few months earlier. Like many other members, Krause spent a significant chunk of his career in the corporate world before venturing out on his own.

Two of his biggest clients have come from BNI-related referrals.

“It has definitely been a financial plus for me,” said Krause. “Plus, it helps to get together with other professionals at least once a week. When you work for yourself, it gives you that professional reason to get up in the morning.”

Tracy Houck, owner of Technical Shmechnical, an Oak Park-based computer consulting business, joined the group in 2002 after an invitation from a client whose computer she was fixing.

“It is invaluable in two ways: the referrals—and the referrals from the referrals and the referrals from the referrals from the referrals—and also in creating business relationships,” Houck said. “Another member (Keith Carrizosa of Azure Horizons) and I cover for each other on jobs when one of us is unable to get to a client as soon as they want.”

The roots of the group and its continuity can be traced to Roz Byrne. The chapter’s first—as well as current—president, she was at the first meeting of OPRF Partners of BNI in early 2002.

“I figured real estate had to be all about referrals, and business-to-business referrals can sometimes hold even more value than regular referrals,” said Byrne, a Realtor with RE/MAX In The Village. “Business people make sure they have other good business people to refer to their customers.”

“The social aspect of the group is great, but this isn’t a coffee klatch,” Byrne added. “Twenty-five percent of my income has come from referrals that I have received from fellow members. That’s what keeps me going back.”

To register for the Visitors’ Day event, contact Byrne at 708-383-7444 through Monday, April 11. A \$5 fee includes a continental breakfast.

Founded in 1985, BNI is a business and professional networking organization whose primary purpose is to exchange word-of-mouth business referrals among the members. Internationally there are thousands of chapters operating on four continents. Members around the globe pass more than one million referrals per year generating hundreds of millions of dollars in new business annually.

To learn more about BNI, visit <http://www.bnimarketing.com>. For more information about the OPRF Partners chapter, go to <http://www.oakpark1.com>, <http://www.youtube.com/OPRFPartners> or <http://www.facebook.com/OPRFPartners>.