

---

## Find success with a little help from your peers

Appeared September 26, 2004, in the Tri-City Herald

Owning a small business can be great fun and extremely rewarding. It also can be lonely and very scary. Associating with other small businesses owners in "peer advisory groups" is a proven way for the chief decision-makers in a company to reduce vulnerabilities and increase performance.

Atlanta-based consultant Alf Nucifora called peer advisory groups "the best form of training in an arena where there are few programs on how to be a CEO."

There are groups for nearly all sizes and types of businesses. Some focus on one field, such as information technology, while others serve a variety of enterprises. Some restrict participation to one firm per business type or geographic area. Trade associations offer peer-to-peer opportunities, as do educational institutions and specialized organizations that bring small groups together under the guidance of a facilitator.

All have the same objective, Nucifora said: To tap into the wisdom of the group to help members improve their decision-making ability and broaden their management expertise beyond their own limited scope.

The experiences of four Mid-Columbia entrepreneurs illustrate the features and benefits of peer advisory groups.

### **Collaboration, not competition**

"There are a lot of resources to help you get into business. Finding out what to do next - how to run your business better - is a lot tougher," said Will Clemmer, owner of Infrastructure NBS.

Clemmer joined WSA, a Washington state information technology organization, shortly after establishing his computer services and support company four years ago. WSA's Southeastern Washington and Seattle chapters continue to be an important educational and networking resource. "I can't point to a specific sale that came from a WSA meeting, but I pick up a lot of sales and marketing ideas that lead to new business," he said.

Although most members are in the information technology field, Clemmer doesn't see them as competitors. "Everyone has some niche or differentiation," he said. "WSA people are very open with information, and that helps me identify opportunities to team with other companies."

### **Long term success**

One of the toughest businesses to be in these days is the independent department store, yet Grigg's in Pasco continues to thrive. Owner Charles Grigg credits "at least 50%" of his success to his 30-year membership in Worldwide Distributors. This

dealer-owned group provides access to the dual benefits of volume buying and the business acumen of its 200 members.

"There is nothing more powerful than joining with others in a similar business," Grigg said, noting that when he decided to put in new shoe department, he didn't even know the right questions to ask until he started talking with other Worldwide members. "Regardless of the type of business you're in, learning curves are too steep and resources too scarce to risk making mistakes that others can tell you how to avoid," Grigg said.

### **National benchmarking**

Brian Johnson of Motoring Services in Richland and Kennewick is active in two groups of 18 automotive businesses from non-competing markets. They are run by the Bottom Line Impact Group, a national benchmarking and performance comparison organization.

Brian Johnson of Motoring Services in Richland and Kennewick is active in two groups of 18 automotive businesses from non-competing markets. They are run by the Bottom Line Impact Group, a national benchmarking and performance comparison organization.

Participants analyze their business daily and keep a spreadsheet of over 150 items that is shared monthly with the other members. The rigorous program also includes peer-to-peer counseling, group conferences, training, site visits, critiques and goal-setting.

"It does cost money to belong, but the results are well worth it," Johnson said. "I've been able to turn an average business into a successful business, no matter what the economy is like. And I have more free time."

### **A+ for WSU program**

A Mid-Columbia-based resource is the Advanced Business Management Program at WSU Tri-Cities Business LINKS. Designed for chief executive officers and entrepreneurs from non-competing firms, the 10-month program offers practical information on business principles and trends, as well as extensive group interaction. "Retailers and owners of consulting businesses and service companies might do different work, but we all ask the same questions," said recent participant Ruth Harms of Harms Engineering in Pasco. "We want to know what financial information we should be tracking, where we can get marketing assistance and, most important, where we should be taking our businesses."

Harms gave an A+ to the class assignments, individual coaching that identified areas for improvement and development of the firm's comprehensive business plan. "It was the most valuable seminar or class we have taken in more than 20 years in business," she said. The next session begins Jan. 18, 2005. Call 509-372-7142 or email [links@tricity.wsu.edu](mailto:links@tricity.wsu.edu) for information.

All four Tri-City entrepreneurs encourage participation in peer advisory groups. As Grigg said, "One insight can be worth thousands in loss prevention, sales or product development."