

Networking Means Gaining by Giving

Sharing local leads can boost business.

By Mark Wright

What would you say if you discovered an opportunity to turn other business owners and professionals in your community into a potent sales force on behalf of your self storage facility? Some storage pros around the U.S. are saying, "Sign me up!"

Gayla Bartlett, manager of Cranney Self Storage in Danvers, Massachusetts, says she gets about four out of ten storage tenants via her networking activities. To generate leads, she participates in the Danvers chapter of BNI (Business Network International), serves on the board of North Shore Women in Business (nswib.org) and attends chamber of commerce events.

"You have to get to know everyone and understand how you can help each other," explains Bartlett.

She particularly focuses on developing relationships with professionals that specialize in serving the very same people who are likely to be her prospects, she says. "For the storage industry, the best (networking partners) for me are home stagers, mortgage brokers and realtors."

Find the Right Group for You

Trying out every available networking group in your area is the best way to discover which ones best suit your needs

and personality. The three biggest business referral organizations in the U.S. (in alphabetical order) are: BNI (bni.com), Leads Club Inc. (leadsclubs.com), and LeTip International (letip.com). (Full disclosure: The author has also written for BNI's founder and chairman, Dr. Ivan Misner.)

Some smaller groups are specific to a geographic area, such as I Take the Lead, Inc. (itakethelead.com) which serves Oregon, Washington and Colorado, or Business Referral Group (businessreferralgroup.org), which serves South Florida. Other organizations try for a hybrid blend of online and offline networking, such as BabbleBee (babblebee.com), Biznik (biznik.com) and Ecademy (ecademy.com).

Find groups active near you by using a search engine like Bing or Google and plugging in keywords like "business networking group" or "business referrals" followed by your ZIP Code. You might also have luck using MeetUp.com to locate business networking opportunities in your community. Of course, your local chamber of commerce might know of networking groups and events beyond those it organizes for its own members.

However you locate groups convenient to your location and schedule, a good fit is essential. You need to be

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Rayleen Hufford, manager of A-AAA Key Mini Storage in San Antonio, Texas.

comfortable with the group, and it needs to let you know if it has limits on how many representatives from any given profession or business type can belong. For example, the group might have a space at the table, so to speak, for only one realtor, one life insurance rep, one hairdresser, and so on.

You might find you are the first self storage entrepreneur to seek membership in a particular group. That's good news for you, but once you've been accepted your competitor down the road would have to go in search of a different "chapter" of that organization to join.

You also need to be comfortable enough with your fellow networkers to really trust them, observes Rayleen Hufford, manager of A-AAA Key Mini Storage in San Antonio, Texas. "I tried a number of (networking groups)," says Hufford. "We have several that meet weekly or monthly. This one just seemed like a more personal level where you can get to know people. You want to trust a person and when you give them referrals you want to know how they will handle them."

In addition to trust, another "must" for networking success is the ability to briefly and succinctly describe your ideal prospect—in other words, the prospective storage tenant you most want to attract to your facility. "It's easier for others to give you a referral if you can be really specific about what you want," advises Mariano Gagliardi, resident manager at First Street Storage in Beaumont, California.

Invest the Effort

Effective networking is a two-way street, however, cautions James Neff, co-owner of family-run Goodhart Farms Storage in Harbor Springs, Michigan. "You get out what you put in," says Neff. "If you attend (a meeting) with the attitude that you can sit there and referrals will just come to you, that's not how it is. Givers gain. Having members know who you are, what you do and how you go the extra mile is very important."

While inexpensive compared with most other forms of marketing, generating quality word-of-mouth referrals requires a consistent investment of time and effort. "If I can get one 30-foot motor home from a referral, I've

paid for my BNI membership," notes Neff, whose facility specializes exclusively in storing boats, RVs, cars and motorcycles. "How hard can it be to get one?"

You need to be clear and realistic with yourself about your ability to commit to a particular networking group. Unlike a typical chamber of commerce mixer, where "networking" usually means informally introducing yourself to people and perhaps chatting about local business issues, a referral group is often more structured—and focused on passing pre-qualified leads from one member to another.

Anita Loveday, manager of Parkway Storage in Knoxville, Tennessee, says she is a member of her chamber and goes

to some of its events, but notes that a lot of them don't provide much opportunity for quality one-on-one interaction. In the referral group she attends regularly, "you get connected better and have one-to-one time to spend with people."

Another benefit of the structured approach of a referral-focused organization: You will almost surely grow in your ability to talk passionately and persuasively about your storage facility.



Gayla Bartlett, manager of Cranney Self Storage in Danvers, Massachusetts, says she gets about four out of ten storage tenants via her networking activities. Photo: D'Anna Portrait Studio

"It's taught me to be able to speak and do presentations—helped me with my comfort level," says Gagliardi. "Before I did this networking, I hated talking in front of people. Also, of course, it's taught me to ask for what you really want and maximize your referrals."

Bartlett agrees. In fact, she has had to give some creative presentations to educate her fellow networkers about self storage. She once brought her six-year-old daughter's doll house to a meeting to demonstrate what pieces of furniture fit in various sizes of storage units at her facility. Another of her presentations focused on memories in boxes, why people store things like heirlooms and other items, and why they feel comfortable storing with Cranney Self Storage. And in a third talk, she educated her group's members on Cranney's climate control storage versus other types of self storage.

Networking isn't necessarily for everyone—unless, of course, you happen to be the only person staffing your facility. In that case, it's time to step up to the plate and develop your talents more fully.

"You want the most outgoing and energetic person out there selling," advises Bartlett. After all, she says, "storage is way too exciting to send someone boring." ❖