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Lunches Give Businesswomen a Chance to Find Clients, Make Contacts

By Jennifer Craig, Regional Manager, WESST Enterprise Center, Las Cruces

Networking is a form of marketing that exponentially increases the influence that a professional or business owner can have when searching for new markets or clients. WESST, a nonprofit that helps build small businesses in New Mexico, used the occasion of Women's History Month in March to teach women entrepreneurs how to use this powerful tool: The organization's Las Cruces enterprise center started an Empowering Women in Business Networking lunch meeting so clients and other women could mingle, share ideas, get acquainted and help one another.

The gatherings started small — about three dozen women — but that number nearly doubled by June, suggesting that WESST had tapped into an unmet need.

From Client to Caterer

One WESST client took the networking message to heart and catered low-cost meals for two monthly gatherings. Olga Nunez, owner of Chihuahua's Restaurant in Las Cruces, provided Mexican food one month and Italian the next to benefit directly from the interaction with other women.

Nunez's business has been open for 11 years — first in the center of town and now in the food court at New Mexico State University. While the move to NMSU broadened Nunez's customer base during school sessions, her traffic slows during summer and winter breaks, and that's when she misses being part of the downtown economy.

As the result of catering the meetings, Nunez has acquired new customers and requests for additional menus. She has also gained more confidence about her ability to transfer the networking skills she polished in Mexico to her life in the United States, even though she said she doesn't speak English as well as she'd like to.

Investment of Time That Pays Off

Since networking is relatively inexpensive, it would seem obvious that this is an area where businesses — whether owned by women or men — should spend time and attention. Yet many entrepreneurs are so overwhelmed by the daily demands of running a business that they forgo events that offer networking opportunities. This mistake could cost them financially in a fast-paced world where who you know is often as important as what you know.

There's more to networking than arriving 15 minutes early to pass out cards and meet people before activities begin. It's more than listening for leads and tips or talking to others.

Networking is relationship building — investing in the future — where contacts are made that can be beneficial later, if not immediately. It is a place to connect with a lot of people at one time who could be potential customers or whose own friends and acquaintances might like a business's services or products. "We started out with instructions on writing and presenting a 30-second elevator speech," said Jo Ann Garay, WESST program coordinator and trainer. "During one meeting, we had women introduce each other, which required them to carefully think and write out their speeches. Another month we had people draw seat numbers so they would not be sitting with friends."

For more information about WESST, visit www.wesst.org. For information about the Las Cruces Empowering Women in Business Networking lunches, call 575-541-1583.

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