



BUILDING A BETTER BRIDGE

A key reason businesses join chambers is to get more customers. Some chambers have devised ways to cater to both large and small members simultaneously.

by Catherine Lada

Chamber members, particularly small businesses, want to see an almost immediate return on investment (ROI) on their chamber membership in the form of tangible benefits: group health insurance, discount purchasing programs, opportunities for business development, and the like. Conversely, larger companies also want to see an ROI for their chamber investment, but generally in the form of increased economic prosperity and quality of life, as well as high-level connections and opportunities for business development.

Can chambers please both these audiences with the same benefits? Through some new twists on a program many chambers offer their members, it appears they can. The procurement seminar, a networking and business development program that connects suppliers and purchasers, is helping chambers increase their own ROI on the staff time and other resources needed to run them. Here are a few of the ways that chambers have tweaked the basic procurement seminar to meet member needs as well as increase revenue and membership recruitment and retention, meet diversity objectives, and more.

Networking events

At the chamber in Northern Kentucky, “A Chance to Meet” is the 7-year-old monthly networking forum for local, small vendors and large suppliers to meet the purchasing decision-makers of larger companies in the area. The purchasing agents benefit by learning of local sources for product and services their companies may purchase. The potential suppliers have the opportunity to ask specific questions relating to the purchasing procedures of the highlighted company. The chamber works with any speakers ahead of time to ensure that the audience is made up of the most relevant attendees, in terms of a product and service match.

Over the past three years, the Northern Kentucky Chamber’s net revenue has increased almost 20 percent to about \$12,000 per year in annual sponsorship and registration revenue. In addition to driving revenue and serving over 500 to 800 attendees per year for this 15-hour per month staff investment, the chamber is able to strengthen its partnerships with local and national minority chambers as well as other organizations providing services to small businesses in their community. This connection pays off for both the chamber’s member businesses as well as the chamber itself.

“One of the biggest selling points of this program to our large employers is access to small businesses as well as those small businesses that are minority-owned or women-owned,” says **Nicole Christian, CCE, Vice President of Business Development, Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce**. “Our own work targeting our members as well as our partnerships with organizations like the African-American Chamber of Commerce, Kentuckiana Minority Business Council and South Central

Ohio Minority Business Council ensures that the right audience is in front of the right speaker.”

The program has proven so successful that the chamber has developed a “cook book”, or guide, to the development, management, and marketing of the program to share with other chambers. At least a dozen other chambers have implemented their own versions of “A Chance to Meet” across the country.

Chances to meet others

Expanding on that principle, the **Dayton (OH) Area Chamber of Commerce** offers its members a chance to meet business owners and professionals from neighboring communities, and in an unusual twist on the “speed dating” concept. However, rather than bringing singles together for a blitz of 2-minute introductions to a large group of fellow singles, the Dayton Chamber is playing matchmaker between business owners and professionals to stimulate business-to-business sales.

The chamber offers “New Business Connections,” a program that brings groups of 120 to 160 businesses together every quarter to network. The chamber charges a per-event registration fee of \$18 and does not permit non-members to participate. Because it keeps its out-of-pocket expenses so low, the chamber nets about \$8,000 annually for an investment of about 15 hours of staff time per event.

Only one representative per company is allowed at each event. When each attendee enters the event, he or she is handed a plastic collection bag, which includes a rotation card. The card specifies their “rotation pattern” detailing their starting table as well as the subsequent tables that should be visited in the order listed. The rotation pattern, developed by a business school class at local Wright State University, ensures that participants don’t see the same businesses twice.

Each attendee at each table gives a two-minute presentation and has the option to hand out materials. When all at the tables have concluded their presentations, everyone rotates to their next “assignment.” Each attendee meets 36 other businesses in a two-hour window. The evening ends with a networking reception, produced entirely with in-kind sponsorships, for attendees to follow up with one another or meet still more businesses.

“Our small businesses have gotten really creative with their presentations,” says **Maureen Patterson, Vice President of Member Relations, Dayton (OH) Area Chamber of Commerce**. “I’ve seen a baker bring a wooden spoon with her business card and cleverly-worded information card attached; an office environment company representative bring miniature plastic chairs with his business card attached; and chocolate business cards are gaining popularity. One sign/exposition company representative brought along, set up, and took down in his two minutes the actual pop-up table-top trade show booth he wanted the small business owners to buy.”

The Dayton Chamber added even more member value to the program in 2005 by partnering with chambers in surrounding communities for larger networking events. “We’re taking this program to a whole new level,” says Patterson. “Partnering with neighboring chambers to expand both our members’ markets is a win-win scenario for us all.”

Educational events

In addition to the networking components of procurement events, chambers may also choose to educate their small business members on becoming suppliers to big business, even presenting course graduates with certificates of completion to demonstrate their new knowledge to potential buyers. The **Greater Philadelphia (PA) Chamber of Commerce (GPCC)**, in partnership with Citizens Bank of Pennsylvania, launched the GPCC Supplier Network Series in February. The series was developed with the guidance of the chamber’s small business board of directors, a volunteer advisory council that identified the needs of both large and small businesses in the procurement arena.

The GPCC Supplier Network Series is a set of courses, taught in two full or four half-day sessions. The series is designed to coach small businesses on the skills necessary to compete for contracts with large corporations and government agencies. It also better qualifies these businesses to pursue large bids, expand their business opportunities, and grow their bottom line.

Upon completion of the series, participants receive certificates that are good for three years or until chamber membership

lapses (whichever comes first) and are recognized on the GPCC website and other marketing materials, highlighting their products and services. Representatives of the 35 large corporations that currently support the GPCC Supplier Network act as course instructors, and the companies agree to recognize the programs’ graduates as qualified vendors.

The chamber’s supplier network has driven revenue through new sponsorship dollars and new memberships as well as through attendee registration. The \$250 series price tag has generated \$10,000 in revenue since the program’s inception in February of 2005. During that same period, the chamber can directly attribute \$60,000 in new membership dollars to the program, which was offered as a free membership benefit to targeted new member businesses when they joined the chamber.

Though the chamber doesn’t guarantee new business will be generated, it has seen results and plans to track the long-term success of program graduates. “To date, we know of two contracts signed between a GPCC-certified vendor and large company,” says **Jennifer Rodier, Vice President of Membership Services, Greater Philadelphia (PA) Chamber of Commerce**. “The buying cycle for some large corporations can be up to two years. That demands attention to long-term measures of success.” The chamber is also looking to grow the Supplier Network, possibly by offering separate tracks for service and product companies and by offering expanded networking opportunities for program graduates.

Also true in Kalamazoo

Rodier said that the GPCC Supplier Network was loosely based on the Small Business Certification Program of the **Kalamazoo (MI) Regional Chamber of Commerce**.

“The program began when Kalamazoo-based purchasing agents alerted us to an important local trend related to their procurement practices,” said **Judy Moore, Executive Vice President, Kalamazoo (MI) Regional Chamber of Commerce**. “The ever-increasing number of functions that the region’s largest employers outsource—such as janitorial service, lawn maintenance, and

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Visit info/procurement/ for links to the chamber programs mentioned in this article as well as related resources.

technology-related services—created a largely unmet demand for vendors with expertise in contracting and contract fulfillment. At the same time, small businesses expressed their needs for help in competing for these types of contracts to expand their markets.”

In response, the chamber created a steering committee—comprised of chamber board members from major employers—to develop a curriculum. The group examined their own current vendor requirements to identify a consensus curriculum that would apply more universally. After several weeks, the chamber developed a tentative curriculum:

- Pre-Qualification – Estimating, bidding, scheduling.
- Safety Criteria – Structure, programs, policies.
- Human Resources – Background checks, drug testing, wage & labor issues.
- Insurance, Liability & Bonding
- Bookkeeping and Invoicing
- Marketing
- Sales/Building Relationships
- Financing & Business Planning

Knowing from experience that small business owners have limited time, the chamber devised a program that required only two hours for each session. Local industry experts were tapped to present each topic. The chamber employed a multi-channel marketing strategy to get the word out about the new program:

- Newsletter article (readership 5,000)
- Press release to the local paper (ran in the business section)
- Website stories and news
- Flyers at chamber events

- Flyers at events of associated business organizations (such as the Minority Business Association)

- Two-hour introduction event

The free two-hour introduction served to educate small businesses about this new program before committing to the \$79 fee. The introduction featured the original committee members speaking about why they conceived of and why they support the program, as well as an overview of the logistics and session topics. In order to assure that small and large businesses come together once the training is complete, the chamber added the Buyer-Supplier Exchange: on the last day of the eight-week program, graduates attend a 90-minute networking session designed to get these small businesses face-to-face with the purchasing agents of the community’s largest employers.

The \$60,000 in funding for the program came predominantly from the chamber’s foundation but also from registration fees as well as one corporate sponsorship. To date, three series have been held, and 35 different companies have been certified.

Pleasing big and small

For chambers, such programs with a dual benefit speak for themselves. As small companies sharpen their business strategies and techniques to compete in the regional market, large companies gain an expanded, qualified collection of vendors with which to do business. ☐☐

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