

Join BNI and Watch Your Business Grow

Stacey Anderson, Organized Innovations, LLC, Seattle, WA



Are you looking for a great way to get new referrals, learn about new resources for your clients, and meet other small business professionals? Then I recommend learning

more about Business Network International (BNI). BNI is the largest business networking organization in the world. Started by Ivan Misner in 1985, BNI provides a “positive, supportive, and structured environment for men and women to further their business through word-of-mouth marketing.”

When I attended the 2006 NAPO Conference I went to an early session that was specifically designed for those new to the field of professional organizing. Having only been organizing for 2 months I was a sponge for information, suggestions, and perhaps the “golden ticket” on learning how to grow my business. They mentioned BNI and what a wonderful resource it was. But then I heard BNI talked about as a great resource in several different sessions that I attended. Like many of us, I took notes at conference but it took me a while to digest everything I wanted to follow up on. In the back of my mind I kept thinking about BNI—what was that all about? I finally went to the Web site (www.bni.com) and found several local chapters I could visit free of charge.

I decided to attend a local meeting to see what the concept was about. When I first entered the room I was quickly and warmly greeted by several people interested in who I was and what I did. The meetings are held weekly at the same time and location. BNI does require that you attend the meetings, because this is how you get to know and build relationships with the other members. Each meeting lasts 90 minutes and follows a specific agenda. The first 15 minutes is open networking time that allows you to talk with the members and any visitors.

The basic idea behind BNI is that only one person from each profession may join the chapter (e.g., there is only one accountant and one professional organizer in each group). This allows for less competition for any referrals that may be generated. The

other premise is that the members become your sales force when they are out in the community. They call this the “Givers Gain” philosophy. During the meeting each member is allowed time (30–60 seconds depending on the size of your group) to give a “commercial” or elevator speech about their business. It is the perfect opportunity to say what you do and “This week the perfect referral for me would be...”. That way, other members know exactly to whom they should refer you and what services you provide.

I have now been a member of my BNI group for one year. The referrals I have received from the other members have resulted in one-third of my business income over the past year.

After I visited a few different groups I found one with the energetic, dynamic, and diverse professionals I was looking to work with, and joined. At first I wasn't very good about giving my commercials and asking for the perfect referral. But that is the great thing about BNI. You are not only meeting other professionals that you can team with, but you are building your speaking and presentation skills. After the members give their commercials, one or two members are highlighted as speakers for each meeting. Each speaker has the opportunity to talk about his or her business for 8 minutes. At each meeting you learn about the other professionals and the specific services they provide and the clients they are seeking to work with.

The other way you learn this information is something BNI calls “one-to-ones”. A one-to-one is when you meet with another group member for coffee, or at their business, and spend approximately 1 hour talking about each other's products and/or services. This is a great way to build the relationship, learn about various businesses, and just get to know other people. The meetings allow you to know the person and the business on a very

profound level, so when you refer a client to them, you know they will be taken care of and treated professionally.

The last part of each BNI meeting is passing referrals. For example, perhaps the realtor of the group has met with someone who has just bought a house who states that he or she is very overwhelmed and disorganized. The realtor might mention me (the professional organizer) and say that he or she knows a great resource and give him or her my card, or ask the client whether it is okay for me to call. During the meeting, that would be a referral from the realtor to me. I would then call the client and hopefully the strong lead would result in a sale.

Each BNI group varies in size and therefore in the amount of referrals passed. But as a whole, in the year 2006, BNI passed over 4.9 million referrals in 4,600+ chapters with over 92,000 members in 36 countries resulting in more than \$1.9 billion in business. (On a personal note, my local chapter has an average of about 32 members and passed \$540,065 between our members last year.) But the great thing about BNI is that participation is up to you. There are no minimum requirements for referrals or one-to-ones. You receive back what you put into the group and the process.

I have now been a member of my BNI group for one year. The referrals I have received from the other members have resulted in one-third of my business income over the past year. Overall, I have met some really great people who are fun, hard-working, generous professionals who want to help me succeed. Visitors to our group often comment on our high energy and liveliness. In the end, the group as a whole is there to create networking opportunities, powerful partnerships, and generate income for those involved. I am glad to have increased the resources for my clients and am excited to be able to provide business to my other BNI members. If you are not already a BNI member, I suggest visiting a local chapter or considering forming one in your area. ^{NAPO}

Contact Stacey Anderson at stacey@organizedinnovations.com