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Morris Chamber's newest strategy: Matchmaking

Emphasis shifting to helping businesses form partnerships

By *MARK KITCHIN*
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It's a good bet that of the 700 companies that comprise the Morris County Chamber of Commerce, not one of them specializes in matchmaking.

That business has been left to the chamber itself.

Gone are the days when the organization's function involved little more than holding parties and passing around business cards. The troublesome economy is causing member establishments to be more labor-intensive, and businesses big and small are becoming more focused in forming relationships with the chamber's help.

"It all comes under the umbrella of adding value," Chamber of Commerce President Paul Boudreau said. "Our members are dealing in a challenging economic environment. They want to work with us on a specific strategy. We're doing networking, but it's a little different. It's not enough to put a bunch of people in a room and hope something good happens."

The strategy seems simple enough.

Members are being asked what are the top five fellow chamber member-companies that they would like to do business with. The chamber serves as matchmaker and finds proper ways to introduce them.

Hold seminars

Traditionally, the chamber has always provided programs to better serve their members. They regularly hold seminars on subjects ranging from identity theft to business etiquette and time-management.

They also hold their share of power breakfasts and golf outings and even hold events with cultural themes.

The chamber has gotten involved in other community endeavors. For example, it has a strong relationship with the New Jersey National Guard, and its members have pledged to assist military personnel and their families.

So the chamber's interest in helping businesses find beneficial partners is not a big stretch. The difference is that now they are performing it in a different and more efficient way.

"We're doing it a little more focused," Boudreau said. "We're giving more people individual attention."

The downturn in the economy is one of the reasons the chamber is trying a new approach.

Its members range from start-up businesses to major Morris County employers such as Novartis and Atlantic Health. Different businesses have different needs and issues to deal with. It is not being used as a ploy to gain new members.

"Membership has been really steady," Boudreau said. "In this kind of economy, companies move,

companies merge. You see some attrition. We actually netted some new membership."

Some of the members genuinely like the idea of meeting new people and their businesses, and helping someone who might return the favor later on is a positive way to network.

"They've been successful in our business," Deirdre Wheatley-Liss said. "They've referred to me some startups from small-business owners for planning services. I have actually gained new clients, through introductions, who want to work with our financial-planning services."

Wheatley-Liss is an attorney and shareholder at Fein, Such, Kahn and Shepard in Parsippany whose specialty is elder law.

She also is an active member of the Chamber and said she believes that a member's benefit depends upon what is put into chamber opportunities.

"I talk about it as a way of karma," Wheatley-Liss said. "If it involves introducing somebody to somebody else, I'll do it.

"It's the ability to get in touch with people. It's not just passing out cards. ... People are looking at how they do business, and usually you do business with people that you know and people that you like."

The approach seems to have energized the membership.

"It's added value to the membership in a very bottom-line fashion," Wheatley-Liss said.
