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SCORE counselor Lisa Bentson is president of Lead's Club, a worldwide networking organization founded by her mother, Ali Lassen. Lisa shares her thoughts on the importance of business networking for new and aspiring entrepreneurs.

Q: Would you say that your mother was a pioneer in the business networking field?

A: She certainly was. Here she was in 1978 with two small, home-based businesses and no ad budget. Most of the usual business organizations were closed to women at the time. So she started the first structured network for women in Orange County. Today, Leads Club has hundreds of chapters around the world. And yes, men have been welcome as members since the mid-1980s.

Q: How do structured networking groups differ from other types of groups?

A: The idea is to encourage members to pass along leads as well as receive them. Members pay a fee and must meet attendance requirements, and they take turns making in-depth presentations at meetings. Each chapter is limited to 30 members, each of whom may represent only one business category per chapter—one lawyer, one CPA, and so forth. So, you're alerted to trends and issues that are affecting other businesses while working on building your own.

Q: There are many good reasons for entrepreneurs to network. What do you feel is the best one?

A: Wouldn't you like to do all of your business by referral? By networking, you're building personal and professional contacts who will help you meet your goals. More importantly, you're also building business friendships.

Q: Not everyone is a "born salesperson." Any advice for entrepreneurs who may be uncomfortable at the thought of meeting with a roomful of strangers?

A: That is a common concern and fear, but most networking groups are truly eager to meet new people. Your goal at each meeting should be to make two or three solid connections—people who you can learn as much about as possible. That's easy, because most of us love to talk about ourselves.

Q: By the same token, is there a wrong way to go about networking?

A: You should never go in focused on finding out what other people can do for you. You're not there to sell, but rather to exchange information—the most powerful business tool of all.

Q: It's interesting that here in the Internet age, face-to-face networking seems more important than ever.

A: That's because it's human nature for people to connect with other people. And the more time we spend on-line and at our computers, the bigger need we have for human interaction. In fact, Leads Club surveys show that membership among people in their 30s is growing. That's a very technology-oriented age group, yet they too understand the importance of being with other people.

Q: Any final thoughts?

A: Just remember the Golden Rule—when you help other people, it will come back to help you.

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