

Advocacy News

Cheers!

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Here's to Green Drinks and Other Eco-Friendly Groups that Can Boost Your Business

By Carrie Madren

Micro-businesses prosper in communities where they're known and recommended by word of mouth.

In contrast to Chamber of Commerce gatherings or city business networking hours, being a member of a community with a common interest—such as environmental sustainability—can set your micro-business apart from the competition.

“Joining a green network is a very good way to raise your profile in your community,” says Jennifer Kaplan, a marketing and small-business expert who authored “Greening Your Small Business” (Prentice Hall Press, 2009).

Your micro-business need not be strictly environmental in nature, but by implementing green strategies or selling environmentally-friendly products, green groups will welcome you with open arms.

Nurture your sustainable networking and see how a green community can help boost your business.

After-Work Drinks

Last year at 5 p.m. on a Wednesday, more than a dozen strangers trickled into a swanky bar to launch the first Green Drinks' gathering in Frederick, Md. The draw was not the color of their libations, but rather the devotion to their cause—the environment.

Green Drinks engages professionals, business owners and others through networking in casual settings, not through impersonal digital connection or fussy formal conventions. Individuals find out the latest local sustainability news, swap conservation ideas, learn about eco-friendly businesses, sell their own green wares and network for jobs, projects and more—all over casual, after-work drinks.

Green Drinks has taken root in nearly 600 cities across the world, with stewardship-minded people of all shades of green mingling in bars and pubs from New York City to Sacramento, Brussels to Bangkok and the Florida Keys to the Galapagos Islands.

At last year's Frederick Green Drinks, networkers doled out handshakes and swapped business cards as they exchanged green business ventures and mutual connections. Among the group was a property

development manager who works with energy efficient heating and cooling systems, an architect who designs green buildings and a self-employed energy auditor.

“This is an opportunity to network with like-minded people in an established group,” says MJ Minton, one of the group’s organizers.

The Frederick Green Drinks group, and hundreds more, can be found at www.greendrinks.org.

Network To Be Known

Attending a local networking group, such as Green Drinks, helps you plug into your community.

“The longer you come, the more your face gets recognized,” says Megan Artz, who coordinates the Bellingham, Wash., Green Drinks.

Such recognition can deliver a host of benefits, from new clients to potential employees. At one gathering, recalls Artz, a young, female college graduate met a regular from the town’s Department of Ecology. She needed an internship, he needed an intern, and a match was made.

Likewise, Lynne Forsman, who started Green Drinks in Annapolis, Md., four years ago, made an important connection. She met the owner of a micro-business that operates shuttle fleets of six-person, all-electric golf carts. Forsman later became the company’s marketing and sales coordinator.

That micro-business found an employee. Many others find valuable referrals.

Consumers used to frequently call Elvia Thompson, another Annapolis Green Drinks organizer, to ask where they could buy solar panels, rain barrels and other green products and services. Because of the numerous calls, she set up a Web site to connect green-minded locals to businesses such as a marina that uses sustainable practices, a hardware store that sells low-toxicity paints, an eco-friendly cleaning service and a rain barrel maker.

Being a part of such a local green network puts you on the community radar, says George Thomas, program director for Upstate Green Business Network’s Rochester, N.Y., chapter.

“Members, and even people who aren’t in the network, call in and say ‘I need help, do you know someone who can do this,’” says Thomas, who’s able to help the caller find local businesses.

Benefits are many when the gathering is at your business: Hosting a networking event gets potential customers in the door.

In Colorado Springs, Colo., Green Drinks organizers change the monthly venue to introduce attendees to new green businesses. Meetings have taken place at a financial planner’s office to learn about green investing; a local brewery that creates sustainable ale; a bicycle shop that has solar panels and others.

Small-business co-owner Rick Erber runs the organic coffee roaster Chesapeake Bay Roasting Company in Crofton, Md. Last year when he hosted Green Drinks at his company’s headquarters, he launched a new logo and coffee blend as attendees sampled his coffees and munched on appetizers.

“It’s a great way to get the buzz out,” he says, about what his company offers.

Any micro-business owner would benefit from joining a green network, and even owners who don't currently use green business practices "can be exposed to new ideas," Erber says.

Once you're known as a business that is making green strides, you may find that introductions to potential clients, suppliers or supporters come readily.

"If you're a member of the community first, then a vendor second, you're going to do better in that community," says small-business expert Kaplan.

Other Green Groups To Join

Green Drinks can be counted among the most casual of green networks because you can just show up at a gathering.

But, other green communities offer their own benefits for a micro-business.

Meetup.com is an online site that brings individuals together face to face in the same locale. Meetup groups—such as The D.C. Green Connection and The Boston Green Business Networking Group—gather around the nation for in-person networking. Participants learn about local opportunities and support sustainable businesses. You can find a local group at www.Meetup.com (search for "green business" plus your nearest city).

Also around the country, Eco Tuesday meetings take place in nearly a dozen cities from Denver to Minneapolis. Attendees network, collaborate and swap ideas. Find out if there's an Eco Tuesday meeting near you at www.ecotuesday.com (click on the "Local" tab to choose a city).

Micro-business owners who want to be greener can also find camaraderie in local or regional sustainable business associations.

The San Francisco Green Business Program recognizes about 150 companies that practice green business operations. Members can use the program's green logo, attend events with hundreds of other business leaders and enjoy free environmental consulting.

Being a member of the Green Business Program has brought in many new clients for Arturo Kane, who owns Toner Cartridge Services, a micro-business in San Francisco that remanufactures toner cartridges and repairs printers. Aligning his company with a like-minded group has been good for business, says Kane.

"We get calls all the time from people who have gotten our number from the program's green business directory."

Carrie Madren is a Maryland-based freelance journalist who networks at her own local Green Drinks to collect story ideas, meet potential sources and discover upcoming opportunities.

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