

Girls' talk

By Cynthia Hanson
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Shelly Sun had an experience last spring of the difference in how men and women approach networking events.

At a get-together for Lake County business owners, an insurance salesman walked up to her, introduced himself and promptly asked whether she knew anyone who would be interested in his services. He didn't ask her anything about her company.

Ms. Sun was offended.

"I took his card, ended the conversation and never called him," says Ms. Sun, 34, president of Gurnee-based 24*7 BrightStar Healthcare LLC, which provides staffing for in-home care.

Ms. Sun, who started her company in 2002, is typical of many businesswomen in that she tends to view networking as an important tool to build relationships that can advance her cause in any number of ways. Women look to exchange information and open lines of communication that could pay off in the future. Many men, on the other hand, go to networking events only in the interest of accumulating sales leads.

"We measure the quality of the event based on the number of business cards we collect," says Al Wasserberger, 37, a Chicago entrepreneur who has founded two companies, including Spirian Technologies Inc., which was sold to San Antonio-based SecureInfo Corp. in 2003. "But women focus on the quality of the contacts they make. Their networks seem to be smaller, but deeper."

NOT AS FIXED IN THEIR WAYS

Businessmen like Wasserberger and David Weinstein, president of the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center, agree that they could take a lesson from women's approach to networking. Mr. Weinstein observes that women entrepreneurs are more aggressive in seeking advice when their businesses are in the formative stages — a trait he wishes he had had himself.

"Women seem to be more coachable and not as fixed in their ways as men," Weinstein says. "I didn't take advice too well until I failed in my own first business. It's an ego thing."

Before Ms. Sun launched 24*7 BrightStar Healthcare two years ago, she joined the Women's Business Development Center, where program administrators reviewed her business plan and recommended key changes before she sought financing.

Recently she was selected for a mentoring program run by the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center, in which she will get free counsel for a year from a panel of six experts.

"I want to start franchising my business next summer, and I need the best advice I can find to achieve that goal," says Ms. Sun, who was a corporate controller before starting her company.

BENDING OVER BACKWARDS

In addition to gaining insight from experts, women entrepreneurs also value the power of peer networking through such groups as the Alexandria, Va.-based Young Entrepreneurs Organization, a global network with chapters operating in more than 150 cities and 38 countries. YEO's members, which number 110 in the Chicago area, are all under the age of 39 and run companies with at least \$1 million in annual sales.

"These are the people I turn to for help with the things that keep me up late at night, like how to find the right

office space and how to resolve personnel problems," says Barbie Adler, 33, president and founder of Selective Search Inc., a national matchmaking firm based in Chicago. "YEO members bend over backwards to help each other."

Nicole Loftus, 34, CEO of Zorch International Inc., a Chicago-based branded merchandise agency, which launched in April 2002, says she wouldn't be where she is today if it weren't for the advice of other businesswomen.

"We see networking as a commitment, an ongoing process of helping each other," says Ms. Loftus, who belongs to four women's groups that meet monthly for breakfast. She's in the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center-run mentoring program for which Ms. Sun was selected.

In an attempt to emulate the ladies, Mr. Weinstein has organized his own informal gathering, inviting 10 male entrepreneurs to a monthly poker game.

"We share more war stories playing cards than at any other event I attend," he says. "If I'd had this group when I ran my first company, I would have received good counsel."

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