

## GROWING YOUR BUSINESS USING BNI®

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Business referral groups such as BNI (Business Network International) can be an excellent way to grow a business.

This article overviews what business networking organisations are, how to get the most out of them and what to look for.

### WHAT IS BNI?

Business networking organisations unlike, say, The Chamber of Commerce, exist for the sole purpose of encouraging members to pass referral business to each other. There are a number around most of them copying, to some degree, the format started in the USA with BNI. BNI was the brainchild of its founder Ivan Misner a consultant who saw that most business groups didn't provide a structure that supported the passing of referral business.

Why these groups work is simple and work well with most people's perceptions on how to grow a successful business. The groups encourage people to get to know each other and build trust so that they will refer themselves and others to the other member businesses.

BNI has a core value of 'Givers Gain®' reflecting that members need to give business, make the time for BNI and learn

about each other to expect the great results that are achievable. You will be able to find at least one BNI group in every reasonably sized town and city in New Zealand; in fact, in Wellington alone there are 14 groups. The groups, termed

'chapters' meet over a weekly breakfast meeting at pubs, clubs, restaurants, and café's, usually at 7am, although there are 9am chapters around; a full list can be found at <http://bni.co.nz/en-NZ/advancedchaptersearch>.

### WHY BNI WORKS

What makes BNI so effective are a few key factors:

#### **1. Members are expected to attend meetings.**

In fact, there is an attendance policy. This means you know that your key referral partners will be there at your next meeting. Because of this, it can be wise to plan to attend a chapter that meets during one of your 'working on the business' time slots and make yourself unavailable in your booking system.

#### **2. Members meet outside the regular meeting's, also.**

Members are encouraged to get to know about each other's businesses through meeting outside of the official chapter meetings. These meetings are called 'one-to-ones' and are encouraged to take place at a member's business premises. This is great because you can show them your business, and see theirs, and do an introductory session to show

them what you really do. You may even find the other members become customers of yours!

#### **3. There is an expectation of referrals.**

The number of referrals made is measured, encouraged, and members will tell the story of those referrals and thank each

other for referrals received. Usually a referral is a straightforward one to make if the member has become a customer themselves.

#### **4. The groups are non-competitive.**

This means that you will be the only one of your area of expertise in the group, e.g. one business coach, one virtual administrator, one bookkeeper, and so on; you cannot join a chapter which already has one of 'you' in it. There may, however, be complimenting businesses represented, e.g. the virtual administrator/bookkeeper link, who will usually refer business to you, and you to them.

#### **5. It is a structured meeting.**

BNI meetings are run using a structured agenda and a strict timeframe. Meetings are 1 ½ hours long, so a 7am meeting finishes at 8:30am, making it easy for businesses to plan around.

The content of the meeting is a mix of education, member introductions, and a longer, feature presentation of 10 minutes, followed by members celebrating the referrals they have given, and other chapter activity such as one-to-ones.

Members are encouraged to arrive a little early to network.

#### **6. BNI chapters are supported.**

BNI provides chapter members with online and face-to-face training on networking, all as part of membership. The training is easy to do and has been put together by training professionals. Also, there is a Director provided for each chapter, and these BNI representatives visit the chapters quite often and aid the leadership team and are a point of contact for members.

There is also an App and PC-based software programme that stores your membership details and details of the referrals that you have given and received.

#### **HOW DO YOU JOIN?**

BNI meetings are set up to welcome visitors, so the best way to find out more about BNI is to pop along and visit. It can be nice to go along with a BNI member you know, however just visiting yourself is fine. You can register your intent to visit by going onto the BNI website [www.bni.co.nz](http://www.bni.co.nz) and looking up chapters in your area and clicking on the Visit This Chapter button.

Try to arrive a little before the start time, as most chapters will buy visitors breakfast but, if not, you will be asked to order breakfast from the venue. You will be asked to do a quick (up to 60 seconds) introduction of your business. This will occur after the members have done their 'weekly presentations' section of the meeting. You just need to cover who you are, where you're located, and what you do. Many people worry about this part - don't! All the members have been new to the chapter at some stage and they all understand what it is like; they simply want to find out a little about you.

You can visit twice before making the decision to join. I usually suggest that members visit a couple of chapters as each one has its own flavour and culture. Some chapters will have good 'referral hubs': these are groups of members with similar businesses that naturally refer to each other.

If you like that chapter and feel that you could get some good business out of it then you fill out the application form. This form provides some good information about BNI and asks for two business referees. These can be suppliers, customers, or anyone who knows you and your business well. Although not all, most people will be accepted as a member.

#### **HOW MUCH CAN YOU MAKE FROM BNI?**

Like all your other marketing, your BNI membership should make a financial return. Work out how many customers you need to pay for your membership, the weekly breakfast, plus the time that you will invest. Timewise, you will have the BNI meeting plus one to two meetings with members each week.

My personal experience was that around 25% of my customers came directly or as a result of my BNI membership. Results will be dependent upon the effort you put into your BNI membership and identifying a group that works well for you.