

Tap into your ability to steer the course of your career. In this must-read book for entrepreneurial service providers, author, attorney and entrepreneur, J.B. Brocato, teaches you how to start and use a unique business networking group to maximize your ability to generate more business originations.

*"Go confidently in the direction of your professional and financial ambitions and create value for your firm, thus increasing the likelihood of putting more money into your pocket!"*

**-J.B. Brocato**



# A SERVICE PROVIDER'S GUIDE TO STARTING A UNIQUE BUSINESS NETWORKING GROUP

**J.B. BROCATO**

**THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL  
available to an ambitious  
service provider.**

Unlike the vast number of ordinary networking groups available to you as a service provider, J.B. Brocato teaches you **how to create a UNIQUE business networking group**. The idea of uniqueness is critical because it is based on creating a highly efficient group comprised of members with whom you build unique relationships, which are difficult, if not impossible, to replace.

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## INTRODUCTION

One sure way for you as a service provider to increase the likelihood of making more money is to generate new revenue for your firm. Creating new revenue increases your personal value. The business model of a services firm is gravely jeopardized without the rainmaker—that critical individual who can keep business pouring into the organization. In our current economic climate, the competition to secure quality clients is as fierce as ever. To secure the quality clients, you need to have any number of sales and marketing tools at your disposal.

During my many years as a partner with a mid-sized, entrepreneurial law firm, I have been fortunate to develop a personal approach to generating new business. This approach is based on the concept of implementing sales and marketing strategies in ways that are 100% unique. One of the most promising of these strategies is participation in a business networking group. By applying my thoughts on generating new business to networking groups, your focus becomes how to make a networking group unique to you.

The best way to make a networking group unique to you is to form your own group! It's easy once you think through the various aspects of both forming such a group and running it in a way that will insure the longevity of the group. Maximize the power of your group by making it unique to you! In this book, I will teach you exactly how to start a unique business networking group that can yield significant dividends to you and the other members.

## CHAPTER 9

# SELECTION OF GROUP MEMBERS

Selecting the right professionals to join your networking group is critical to its long-term success. Invite only solid candidates into your group. This chapter will discuss a few aspects of the member selection process worth noting. While this process is inherently imperfect, you can gain an advantage by understanding what follows.

### Preferred Size of Your Group

How many people should you have in a face-to-face business networking group? There is no right answer. Your group can be as large or small as you deem appropriate. The real issue is making sure that you are not too small or too large. If your group only has three members, you are likely not casting a wide enough net in the marketplace to generate the volume and quality of leads you desire. Conversely, if you have too many people, it is difficult to keep everyone on track consistent with the overall goals of the group.

Selecting the right professionals to join your networking group is critical to its long-term success.

An initial and reasonable number of group members is ten. If you can select nine other people to join your new networking group who are vetted properly based on the member criteria discussed below, you will be amply rewarded with many leads and a long relationship with quality people who will serve as your personal sales force in the marketplace. It is not always easy to find nine solid candidates. In time, there will be suggestions for the invitation of new members, because either you or your well-connected member colleagues will know of someone who might be great for the group. Consider these people, and grow your group. But do not get too large. If your group reaches twenty people, you might want to really think hard before adding any more members.

## Member Criteria

As you bring other people into your group, use the following member criteria as a guide. This list is by no means all-inclusive. Feel free to create other criteria important to you and not listed below. But at the very least, do not invite a new member into your group unless he or she satisfies each and every requirement below.

**Strategic Non-Competitive Service.** The proposed member must provide a service which does not compete with you (as for the first member you invite into your group), and to all other members thereafter. For example, if you are an accountant, the proposed member should not be an accountant. He should be any professional service provider other than an accountant, such as an attorney, banker, insurance broker, etc. While this sounds simple, it is easier than you might think to make the mistake of inviting in competitive service providers. An example might be two attorneys from different firms, one who practices corporate law, and the other who is a litigator. You might think that since these two people do not technically compete with each other, their co-existence in your group would be okay. But, if the corporate attorney has a litigation practice within her firm, she might be more likely to keep any litigation work in her firm by referring potential litigation work to one of her partners, in turn getting origination credit. Thus, the litigator in your group misses out on an opportunity due to the conflicted interests of the corporate attorney in the group. However, if the corporate attorney's firm has no litigation department, then there is no conflict. Just be careful and ask the right questions about a proposed member's business.

**Familiarity.** A proposed member must be familiar to either you or another group member. The level of familiarity should be relatively high. There is so much disparity of personality among people that you need to make sure the personality of the candidate is consistent with the personalities of other group members. Someone who is very familiar with the candidate will be able to best assess the individual's potential to be a good citizen within the group. If you are not familiar with an individual, there is a much higher risk that the person will turn out to be someone no one expected. In some cases it takes a while for the "real person" to come out, and during such time you are investing in that person by inviting him into your network of valuable contacts (as are the other group members).

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**Ambition.** The candidate must be ambitious. Ambition is one of the keys to any sort of success. Without it, your future relies heavily of fortuity. Given the intense competition among service providers, it is wise not to rely on fortuity to pay the bills. Ambition drives people. It keeps them sharp and their focus where it needs to be. People without ambition will not go the extra mile for you. You need people who want to take things to a whole new—higher—level. Ambitious people want to raise the bar. Once they hit a plateau, they want to set a new bar for themselves. This is the sign of someone who is destined to succeed. You want to align yourself with someone like this. The alternative is someone who is not constantly taking his career to the next level. Members who lack ambition will not be out there trying to always meet new people. They will not go up to that stranger at a cocktail party and exchange business cards. And they will not aggressively look for opportunities for you and the other group members. They will not do so because they lack the drive that ambitious people possess. You need to ask proposed candidates about what they have done in the past to get to where they are today. Have them explain exact steps they have taken to grow their business. While there is no precise test for identifying an ambitious person, typically the answers to the above questions will make it obvious to you whether someone possesses that drive or not.

**Same or Greater Existing Level of Success.** Candidates for admission to your group should have gained the same level of success as you (and the other members, on the average) or, preferably, a greater level of success. You have likely heard the old saying that goes something like this: if you want to be rich, it helps if you hang around rich people. Similarly, if you want to grow your network, originate new business, and make more money, hang around people who have grown a solid and respectable personal network of contacts. Hang around people who have a history of bringing in business for their firms. And hang around people who are making good money! These are the people who have the potential to provide the most value to your group. The alternative is someone who has a limited network of contacts, has not originated a lot of business, and who is not converting his efforts into take-home pay. Is this the type of person in which you and your other group members want to invest valuable resources?

Candidates for admission to your group should have gained the same level of success as you (and the other members, on the average) or, preferably, a greater level of success.

There is one important exception to this idea, namely, there may be a candidate who simply screams “future rainmaker.” Typically, these are younger professionals who have not been able to satisfy the above criterion regarding the extent of past success because they have only been practicing their craft for a short period of time. If the person gives you a strong comfort level, there could be good reason to invite that person into your group. You might want to do so before another business networking group snatches him up! So before you make a formal invitation to a new member, ask some direct questions about that person’s success in terms of converting business development efforts into new clients. Usually people who have been successful in this area will not be shy about sharing their successes with you.

**Depth and Breath of Existing Network.** An individual might have a lot of people in his network of contacts, but that does not necessarily mean that such a stable of contacts will be beneficial to your group. How strong are the relationships that person has with his contacts? How long has he known his most important contacts? How many of the candidate’s contacts are actual clients of his? Is he the primary contact for his firm with those clients? Are many of the contacts related? For example, are 80% of the candidate’s contacts in a particular industry? Ask these questions. You want people who have very strong relationships with their base of contacts. This will provide a higher likelihood that those contacts will be receptive to your pitch to them. You want people who have many contacts across a number of different industries and areas of specialty. This will exponentially expand your reach within the marketplace. Cast a wide net when mining for new business. Get fishermen on your team who will help you cast that net. Ask candidates to describe some of the relationships they have with their best contacts. Ask them to give examples of various business contacts they would introduce to other group members if admitted to the group. Will this person help you and the other members of the group cast a wide net?

A related question is: What existing loyalties does the proposed member have to outside service providers who are in competition with existing group members? Oftentimes service

providers—especially the ones who are successful—have friends who are also service providers. If such friendships are strong, then those outside friends are much more likely to get valuable referrals than members of the group, purely based on strong, pre-existing relationships with such outside service providers. The risk of outside referrals being made to the detriment of group members exists. So ask proposed members about their pre-existing relationships with other service providers. While having such pre-existing relationships may not preclude a proposed new member from entry into the group, a group's understanding of this dynamic will allow the existing members to make an informed decision about whether or not to invite the proposed new member into the group.

**Involvement in Business Community.** You want people in your group to be involved in the business community. Such involvement will cause them to meet more people, become a more respected authority in their respective fields of expertise, and will put them into more situations where they might be able to help you. On the other hand, people who are not actively involved in the marketplace will miss out on opportunities to grow their business, and, in turn, your business.

Cast a wide net when mining for new business.  
Get fishermen on your team who will help you cast that net.

Ask potential members about the business organizations in which they participate. Ask them if they hold any leadership positions in these organizations. Ask them how often they go to charity functions, or how often they go to social functions where they have ample opportunity to meet new people. You want members who are “out there” in the world meeting new people on a regular basis, growing their networks, and becoming better known for what they do. This will only provide a more solid foundation upon which they can help the entire group in its quest for growth and maximum success for its members.

**Reputation.** Our reputations are everything. A good reputation goes a long way. A poor one also goes a long way, but in the opposite direction. You want to identify professionals who have worked hard to establish and maintain a great reputation in their professions, and the marketplace as a whole. Once someone becomes a part of your group, you start to become identified with that person. You will be judged on the quality of your friends and associates.

If there is any taint on the reputation of a member of your group, it will end up tainting all your members. If you introduce someone with a tainted reputation to one of your best clients, and your client learns about the poor reputation of the person you recommended, the consequences could be harsh. The level of trust your client had in your judgment has just been reduced, if not eliminated. Why risk such a result? Make sure you or someone in your group really knows the person you are inviting in, and vouches for her reputation. Ask some of your trusted friends who may have a reason to know of a candidate and find out what the perception of that person is in the marketplace. Is she known to be honest? Trustworthy? Hard working? If not, take a pass.

**100% Approval of Other Members.** Perhaps the most important criterion for new members is that every proposed new member should have the complete support of each and every then-existing member of the group. 100% approval is prudent. If one or more group members are sincerely opposed to the admission of a proposed new member, there is probably something that member(s) is seeing that the others are not. The nuance of the various criteria described above can be daunting. It is practically impossible for everyone to pick up on or sense all aspects of a candidate's profile. There is something to be said about collective wisdom in this situation.

You want to identify professionals who have worked hard to establish and maintain a great reputation in their professions, and the marketplace as a whole.

If everyone is in agreement, chances are that you have properly vetted the candidate's potential to adequately contribute to the group as you expect. If one or more members doubt that potential, move on. There are other quality people that will come your way in the future. There are a lot of great people out there looking to grow their businesses. Wait for the right people for your group. Further, by having 100% approval, you ward off the situation where things do not turn out the way you hoped, and some members of the group are blaming the members who wanted that person in the first place. Avoid such a scenario, as it may create unnecessary resentment among group members. If you, as founder, are picking the second person for your new group, then the idea of collective wisdom is a stretch, but use your good judgment and make the best decision you can. Try to select a person who is particularly close to you, to completely avoid the risks described above.

## Identifying and Recruiting Members

Now that you have a firm understanding of the member criteria discussed above, you are ready to recruit your first members. The first thing to do is get out your contact list. Go through all of the people you already know, and decide which contacts satisfy all of the member criteria. In some cases, the first person to invite into your group will be someone with whom you are close already. If that person satisfies all the member criteria, then you may just have your first member. Otherwise, take some time to go through your list of existing contacts, and think about who might be a good fit. Remember, this is not an exact science. It will be impossible to know 100% that you have selected the right person. But, given your grasp of the member criteria, you will be able to inquire of your potential member as to the various components of the above criteria.

You should have a frank and honest discussion with your first potential member about your goals for the group, and your personal goals for growing your business. After you recruit your first member, then the two of you should repeat this process for the next potential member, and so on. As you continue to add members, the collective wisdom of the group will increase, thus further reducing the risk that you will make a poor decision on member selection.

Once your group is up and running, you will soon realize that there are certain areas of expertise your group is lacking. You should look to fill these gaps with quality people. Everyone in the group should reconsider their respective contact lists and determine if anyone within such lists is a potential candidate for membership. If not, then you might suggest to the members that everyone seek recommendations from trusted friends about potential candidates who might possess the desired area of expertise.

As you continue to add members, the collective wisdom of the group will increase, thus further reducing the risk that you will make a poor decision on member selection.

If you take this route, the members' level of familiarity with such an individual will be less (if not non-existent), but if the recommendation comes from a trusted friend of an existing member, and your group properly interviews the candidate, you will, in fact, reduce the risk from unfamiliarity as much as possible. If the person otherwise satisfies all the member criteria, it is probably worth taking the risk to move forward.

■ ■ ■

## CONCLUSION

Start a networking group right now! Start thinking of the people you would initially invite into your group. A great networking group can provide both younger and more seasoned professionals a platform to exponentially grow their personal networks and business originations. But care must be taken with respect to the selection of members, the operations of the group, and maintaining member accountability. Members should use the group as their personal sales force in the marketplace, looking for opportunities to make referrals and introductions. Each member would be well served by treating all other members like their potential and existing clients. Grow deep and unique relationships within the group, and watch your business take off!

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## PRaise FOR: A SERVICE PROVIDER'S GUIDE TO STARTING A UNIQUE BUSINESS NETWORKING GROUP

"Every service provider should read this book! It has everything you need to know about starting or participating in a face-to-face networking group. As a professional services marketing consultant, I see first hand how service providers struggle to make networking groups work for them. After one or two attempts, they write it off. Networking groups can work. J.B.'s first hand knowledge and honest, direct style will show service professionals how to significantly increase their business through networking groups."

**Sarah Johnson**  
Director of Consulting Services, PDI Global

"J.B.'s approach to building unique relationships is a business development breakthrough. In this book, he teaches you how to both build those relationships generally in business as a service provider, and within your networking group. By nurturing these unique relationships within your group, each member becomes genuinely motivated to help every other member succeed. As a result, everyone's chances for originating new business increases exponentially."

**Marie Heinrichs**  
Senior Vice President, DeWitt Stern  
Insurance and Risk Advisory

"Wow, where was this book twenty years ago? This is a must read for the professional services provider whether you have been in the industry for many years or are just embarking on your career. This book is a concise and accurately written portrayal of the benefits and challenges of a business networking group. I am excited to be able to offer younger professionals in my firm this book as a tool for their future growth. Business networking groups are an important part of many business development plans and are often less effective than anticipated. Finally someone that "gets it" has written the guide to getting it right."

**Brian P. Sullivan, C.P.A.**  
Partner, Mueller & Company, LLP

"Finally! J.B. Brocato has provided a roadmap, nuts and bolts, and secrets to business expansion through creative networking. While every service provider desires to grow and succeed, they often do not know how to formally develop and utilize a network of personal cheerleaders. If you are looking to build a lasting, fruitful network that will take sales and marketing to a higher level based on your unique characteristics and personal goals, then this is the book for you."

**Cindy K. Andrews, Ph.D.**  
Senior Director, DecisionQuest

"J.B. Brocato demystifies the process of starting a successful business networking group. Read this book and learn how to take the inefficiencies out of running a networking group, leverage the individual networks of all group members, and grow your client list! No matter if you are just starting out in your career or have been providing great service for many years, this book can help you bring in more business than ever before."

**Robert Bernstein**  
Partner, Laner Muchin

"In *A Service Provider's Guide to Starting Unique Business Networking Group*, J.B. Brocato captures the essence of the art of networking—the heart and soul of a service provider's business development efforts. Read this book and learn how to greatly increase your personal network of referral sources and business leads, and get more introductions to potential clients. J.B.'s approach can help you leverage—and thus maximize—your networking efforts."

**Dan Tausk**  
Senior Vice President, Mid-America Real Estate Group

"Everyone in a professional organization needs to improve their talents at "making rain" but often the individual doesn't know where or how to devote his or her time. A networking group is one of the tools a person can use to get out in the community and shake the trees. Mr. Brocato's book provides an incredibly detailed process in how to build a group that will provide a windfall of opportunities. I know of no other book that is as informative or as helpful in accomplishing the goal of creating a unique business networking group."

**Russ Romanelli**  
Managing Partner, Wolf Financial Group

"Very well written! This book is an insightful look into the strategy of networking that will optimize your time and efforts, and provide maximum benefit for not only you but your networking circle. J.B. offers poignant advice for business networking at a time when everyone recognizes the importance of networking, but few know how to do it effectively."

**Shari Haefner**  
National Accounts Manager, Fidelity National Title

**MORE TESTIMONIALS INSIDE!**



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

J.B. Brocato is the Chairman of the Executive Committee & Chief Marketing Officer of Pedersen & Houpt, a prominent Chicago law firm. He graduated *Summa Cum Laude* from Loyola University Chicago, where he studied Economics. Mr. Brocato received his law degree from Northwestern University School of Law and served as an editor of the *Northwestern University Law Review*. In addition to his career in law, Mr. Brocato is a musician and the Founder & CEO of Intense Ventures, Inc., an entrepreneurial company involved in strategic marketing, music management, and publishing. He is also on the Board of Directors of the Better Business Bureau of Chicago and Northern Illinois, Inc., a Member of the American Heart Association Illinois Advocacy Committee, and a licensed Illinois Real Estate Broker. Mr. Brocato resides with his wife and four children in Hinsdale, Illinois.