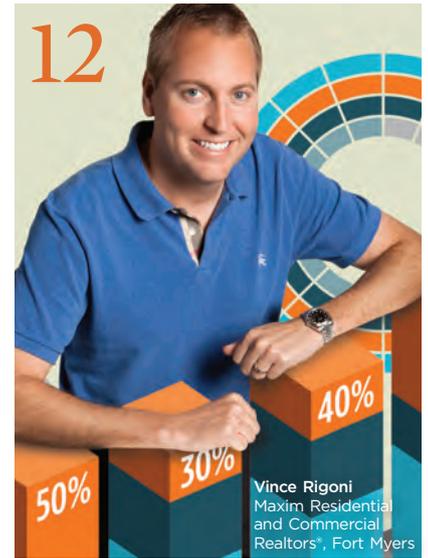




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By joining a local networking group, Lilli Rachel Stevens (center) establishes herself as the go-to local real estate expert.



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As the exclusive real estate industry representative in the group, Lilli Rachel Stevens (center) shares business cards and weekly goals at Business Networking International.

BOOSTING BUSINESS

POWER Networking

Squeeze real results out of your industry networking efforts. Here's how.

Every Thursday at 6 a.m., Lilli Rachel Stevens dons business attire, grabs a stack of business cards and marketing materials, and heads to the weekly meeting of Business Networking International (BNI) members in Hollywood. A sales associate with Island and Resort Realty in Fort Lauderdale, Stevens gives a 45-second pitch (as do others in the group) about what she's looking for that week, such as investors for a condo listing, more connections with move-up buyers, and then spends the other 89 minutes networking with non-real estate professionals. "I tell everyone what I'm

looking for, and they get it for me," says Stevens, who pays annual dues of \$410 to be a BNI member (first-year membership dues are \$560 plus a one-time \$150 registration fee).

Stevens joined BNI in 2005 after hearing about the group from a fellow gym member. Each BNI chapter of the worldwide organization allows only one representative per industry, with Broward County encompassing approximately 25 chapters, each with 20 to 50 members. Stevens estimates that about 60 percent of her annual sales can be traced to her BNI networking efforts. A few years ago, for example, a member from the flooring

industry referred her to a homeowner who needed to sell a \$120,000 condo in Hallandale, just 10 minutes from Stevens' office. She listed and sold that condo and then helped the seller buy another unit. "After that, the client started referring his friends to me," Stevens continues, "and I closed at least two additional deals from that original BNI referral."

As a BNI member, Stevens works closely with member accountants, title company representatives, mortgage professionals and others, who share business tips, ideas and strategies with one another. "The 90 minutes I spend with them every week lead me to more and

more clients,” says Stevens, who enjoys the high level of professionalism that oozes from the 40-or-so members who attend the weekly gatherings. For example, the accountability and discipline required to attend regular 7 a.m. meetings tend to attract only serious professionals who are “there for a reason,” she says.

Stevens also likes her position as the only real estate professional allowed to attend. “I’ve gone to real estate networking events and didn’t get much business from them,” she says. “This is a lot different and much more productive.” Such “warm” leads are prime targets for Stevens, who says the results turn out much better than her efforts at cold calling or using the Web to generate leads.

“The other members of the networking group pull for me and tell the referrals about my professionalism and service levels,” says Stevens. “That goes a long way in helping to turn a lead into an actual customer.”

“Networking is my most important business strategy.”

— Nick Jackson, broker with EXIT Realty The Global Group, West Palm Beach



20 Years of Industry Networking

Realtors like Stevens have come to realize that even in the digital age, getting up close and personal with peers, industry players, buyers and sellers can translate into multiple sales and fruitful, long-term relationships. Nick Jackson is another real estate professional who caught on to the value of networking early in his career. Every year, he attends at least two or three major conferences, participates in various investor seminars in Broward, Dade and Palm Beach counties, and attends a number of trade association meetings and gatherings. He’s been doing that for the last 20 years and says the

efforts nearly always translate into real estate sales.

“Networking is my most important business strategy,” says Jackson, broker with EXIT Realty The Global Group in West Palm Beach. “A lot of agents like to use modern technologies and social media to connect with clients and with each other, but I think the old-fashioned networking strategies still yield the best results.”

While at the events, Jackson says, he talks to contractors, attorneys, accountants and other professionals who nearly always have leads to share once they learn that he’s a broker who specializes in bank-owned and high-end properties. He hands out business cards and wears both a shirt bearing his company’s logo and a nametag to make sure the folks he’s networking with know that he’s a real estate professional. “I never [fail to] put myself out there,” says Jackson. “I’m pretty much networking on a 24/7 basis, whether it’s at a restaurant, an event or an official networking gathering.”

Those efforts paid off recently when Jackson was at a restaurant’s hostess stand waiting to be seated. “I started talking to the other patrons who were standing around me, and a few of them happened to be large-scale investors who controlled a number of area properties,” Jackson explains. “We developed a friendship, and they wound up using my services to buy and sell properties.”

To agents who may not be so forward about networking with strangers

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Realtor® Craig Wilburn hands a past customer an iPad Mini, a prize handed out at the client-appreciation dinner.



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Networking isn’t a one-way street. To get the most out of it, you have to put in time and effort. For example, Lilli Rachel Stevens has served as vice president and president of her BNI chapter, and in 2010, she won BNI’s Givers Gain Award for being the top networking professional in Broward County. She’s also participated in the group’s Member Success Program and taken advanced training through BNI. Stevens says the extra efforts expended on sharing business with other members pay off. “If you just show up, eat breakfast and leave,” says Stevens, “you’re not going to get any business out of networking. Period.”

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Power Networking

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in restaurants and other venues, Jackson says the trick is to be persistent without being overbearing. To network without being pushy, for example, agents should talk little about themselves and their businesses, avoid blatant sales pitches, share valuable tips and focus 100 percent on helping others. Realize that the relationships will likely need time to cure, Jackson says, and that networking rarely turns into business overnight. “It takes some time to build trust, but if you know who you want to target and network with,” he says, “the rewards will come.”

Showing Them Appreciation

Craig Wilburn, senior vice president and broker-associate with **Bosshardt Realty Services** in Gainesville, started holding annual customer-appreciation events three years ago in an effort to get out in front of as many past customers as he could in one place. “It’s basically a big old party and my way of saying, ‘Thank

you for the business and ongoing referrals,’” says Wilburn, who recruits local businesses as sponsors, to help foot the bill for the event. At the event, invitees can expect cocktails and dinner, iPads as prizes, a professional photographer and even a massage therapist.

The event costs about \$6,000 to put on every year, according to Wilburn, whose real estate marketing representative helps spread the word about it via Facebook and other venues, while an outsourced event planner makes most of the dinner arrangements. Wilburn spends about three weeks recruiting the sponsors, who donate \$500 to \$1,000 each to help defray the event costs. These sponsors, each of which is from a different industry, to avoid overlap with the networking, invite their top clients to the event, thus creating more opportunities for Wilburn and his team to mingle with potential customers.

In 2012, Wilburn says, one past customer who enjoyed the event immediately referred her home-seeking sister to him, and thus, he racked up about \$900,000 in sales volume on that trans-

action plus several others that were generated by the same referral. “I may not be networking directly with prospects at my parties,” says Wilburn, “but I’m definitely connecting with a large group of people who are quick to give out my name when [someone needs] a Realtor.”

Ready, Set, Go!

One agent spends a mere 90 minutes a week generating 60 percent of her business, another has built a successful, two-decades-long career around 24/7 networking and another benefits from the time and energy that he puts into an annual customer-appreciation party. These are just a few of the ways that real estate professionals are leveraging the art of networking in a world where electronic communications and digital information sharing are seen as top real estate lead-generation strategies. By getting back to basics, handing out business cards and pressing the flesh, these agents are proving the power of good old-fashioned networking in today’s wired world. ○