

# Exercise. your Options

## NETWORKING BUILDS BUSINESS MUSCLE

By Ann Evankovich

**N**o matter your gender, networking done right is a cardio workout for the heart of your business. Are you looking to strengthen your company's core muscles? Then venture into the world of business networking.

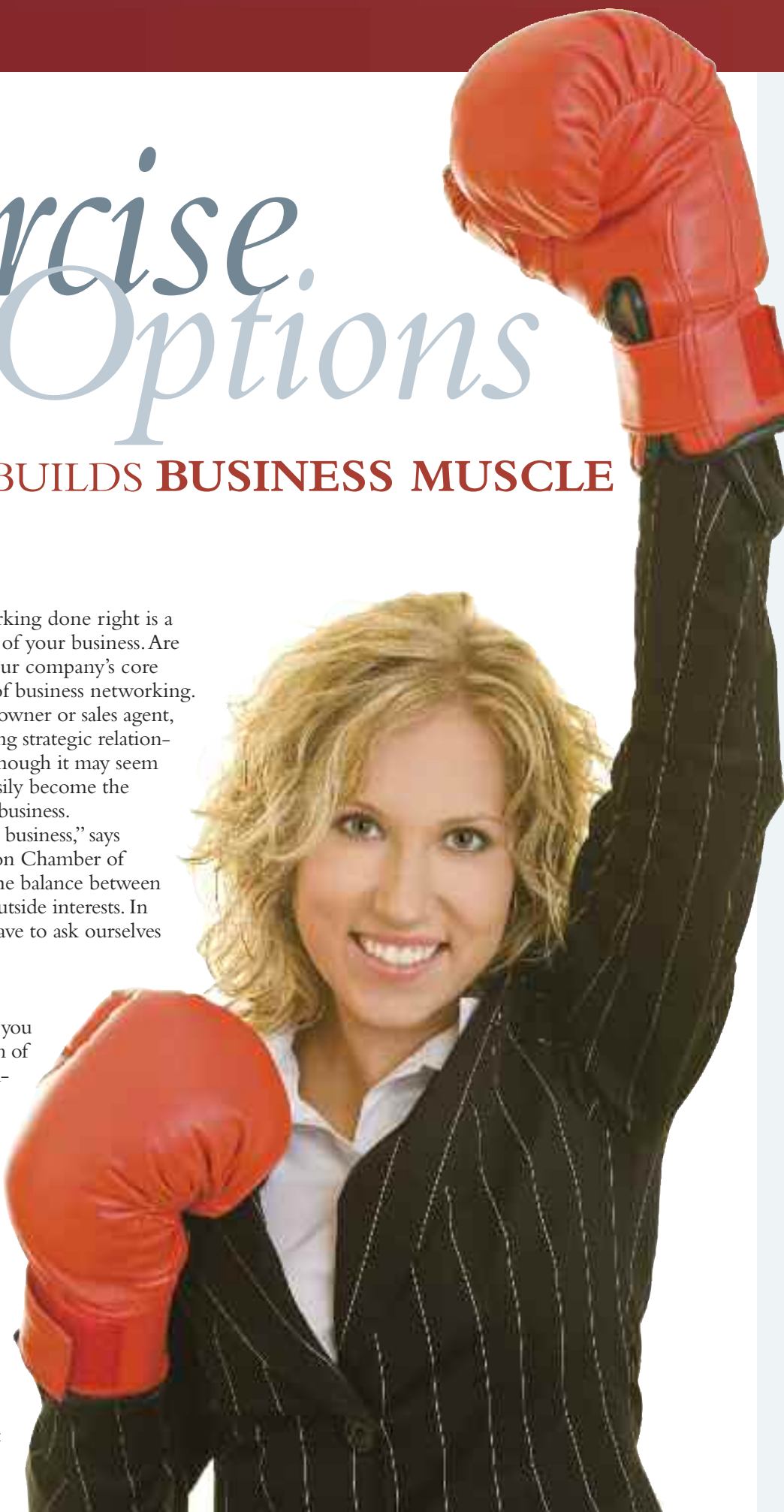
Whether you are a lawyer, retail store owner or sales agent, your business will benefit from developing strategic relationships with diverse local professionals. Although it may seem initially intimidating, networking can easily become the most fun way you ever invested in your business.

"The greatest challenge for women in business," says Judy Wilson, CEO of the Greater Crofton Chamber of Commerce (GCCC) "is trying to find the balance between creating a successful career, family, and outside interests. In order to find the networking time, we have to ask ourselves what are our priorities."

### The Right Fit

Finding the right networking group for you may very well mean finding a combination of memberships. Most networking professionals participate in multiple organizations.

Fortunately, the Chesapeake region provides so many options, even the busiest multitasker can find events to fit her schedule. Most cities have chambers of commerce that host several events each month. Some networking groups always meet for lunch while others mix it up with breakfasts and happy hours. Some national and international organizations, such as Business Networking International (BNI) and the American Business Women's Association (ABWA) not only connect you with local professionals, but link you to chapters all over the world.



You might find an independent network within larger organizations such as your country club or professional association. Some networks focus on certain fields, such as home contractors, artists or senior services.

Although every group is unique, most networks have common components. Events usually provide an opportunity to introduce your business to other local professionals. Often one speaker will address the whole group. Most events include mingling and refreshments; however, some of the most effective networking opportunities take place in other locations, like on golf courses, sailboats or jogging trails.

## Relationship Building

“The more networking you do, the more opportunities you give to those in your spheres of influence because you can connect people vertically and horizontally,” explains Gail Ruppe, BNI Ambassador on the Eastern Shore and Board Member for Chesapeake Women’s Network. “The longer you engage in networking, the more credibility you gain as you continue to build the relationships and help others to succeed.”

Angela Balsamo and her company, Coffee News, get a caffeine-like buzz from several networking organizations. Currently averaging 30 hours a week of networking, Balsamo cut her networking teeth a decade ago in BNI.

Based on the philosophy of “Givers Gain”, BNI chapters provide a safe environment to hone a concise presentation. Chapter members benefit from the policy of category exclusivity, meaning that each chapter would have only one banker, one realtor, or one photographer and so on.

“I was comfortable with the format,” Balsamo says of the weekly meetings. “It provided a good platform to put me in front of other business owners who could utilize my service.” Now participating in several networks, Balsamo says, “Different groups have different personalities. Every group gives me something unique.”



A stack of business cards, referral basket, and a cup of coffee are part of the networker's marketing arsenal.

“Angela has been very helpful in connecting us with other people,” says Leigh Ann Hinton, brand new member of the Crofton Chamber and owner of the Crofton School of Music. “I was a little nervous at first because I’m a musician,” Hinton explains of her first networking experiences, “but it’s been really lovely. It’s been easy.”

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## Networking Advice for Women

### Before Joining:

- Maximize the visitation policy before committing to membership.
- Compare the annual cost plus events fees to the frequency of events.
- Visit a variety of groups to find the ones that work best for you.

### Preparation for Networking:

- Seek out a female business mentor.
- Pack plenty of business cards.
- Bring a few pens.
- Practice your presentation.
- Wear a nametag with your business logo.
- Dress appropriately for your business.
- Brush your hair.
- Wear jewelry.
- Keep gum or mints in the car.
- Wear shoes comfortable for standing.
- Arrive a few minutes early.

### At a Networking Event:

- Introduce yourself to the people around you in a buffet line.
- Look for the person no one is talking to and strike up a conversation.
- Don't sit by people you already know.
- Use a firm handshake, eye contact, and a big smile.
- Pretend you are not nervous.
- Ask about their business needs and listen attentively.
- Be specific about what your business needs are when asked.
- Look at other people's nametags.
- Know your limit with alcohol and don't exceed it.
- Volunteer for a leadership position.
- Avoid personal griping.

### Follow Up:

- Jot notes on the back of collected business cards.
- Send “nice to meet you” e-mails to new leads.
- Do what you say you are going to do.
- Ask questions.
- Leave a pair of comfortable shoes in the car for errands between events.
- Avoid dating within your network.

### Network Out of the Box:

- Sit on the board of a non-profit organization.
- Wear your business nametag when running personal errands.
- Dress nicely whenever out in public.
- Take up golf.

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## Networking is a Woman's Game

Even if speaking before a crowd gives you the jitters, businesswomen thrive in networking groups.

"Women are gatherers," explains Fran Schmidt, CEO of the North Anne Arundel County Chamber of Commerce (NAACCC). "They find out personal things about each other so that they have connections even before they start discussing business. Women also hold on to the information they gather and pass referrals to their contacts." Schmidt cites these gender differences for the growing popularity of the monthly women in business lunches she organizes through the NAACCC.

"I notice that the women seem to build a bond quicker which results in longer and stronger business relationships," says Jerry Schwartz, CEO of Maryland BNI.

"Women seem to find it easier to network than men," observes Adam Santavicca, Principal of CBay Advisory Group, LLC in Crownsville. "Particularly when meeting someone for the first time, I see women being more comfortable in initiating that first contact."

As with any relationship, however, an imbalanced strength can become a weakness. Knowing when to cross the line from professional to personal is a skill acquired



Most networking groups give each member the opportunity to address the whole group. (L-R) Pictured are mother, daughter bookkeepers, Joyce Springuel and Christina Gorman.



## THE GRASS CEILING

### Golf Can be a Valuable Business Tool for Women

If the golf course is where men do business during the golf season, women who golf have an edge not available at a cocktail mixer.

An expert on mixing this pleasure with business, Hilary Bruggen-Fordwich is president of Strelmark LLC Business Development Consultants and a competitive golfer with a 9 handicap. Her company offers consulting and boot camps to strengthen business relationship building skills, including a series of workshops that teach how to leverage business golf to gain and retain clients.



"Golf is unique in terms of business development because the connections established on the golf course become a business bonding experience that lasts a lifetime," Fordwich explains in her workshops.

"Golf is a metaphor for business," she says. "Many characteristics of an individual can be demonstrated on the golf course." In golf, you have the opportunity to see how a potential alliance handles success and failure, how ethical, critical, inattentive or helpful they are. You also have the opportunity to reveal these aspects of your personality to your clients.

"Most tournaments I go to, there are 142 men, one other woman and me," Fordwich says. "I have walked away with new clients from every tournament I have ever played in."

"I can't think of another acceptable way a woman can spend four and a half hours with a man who isn't her husband," she adds.

For women on the course, Fordwich advises, "Chat less and focus on the game of the men more." With a quick web search before playing, even a novice can learn who won the four major tournaments.

"Business golf colors are different from personal golf colors," Fordwich says about women's golf attire. "Leave pink, green, purple, orange and the like at home. Wear khaki, white, yellow, cream, navy, black. I tend to wear black skirts a lot. They are slimming with a white top."

No matter your gender or skill level, Fordwich's advice to business golfers is the same: play more and practice more. Consider the time and capital spent on lessons as an investment in your business.

More information about business golf and strategic relationship marketing workshops are available on Fordwich's business web site, [www.strelmark.com](http://www.strelmark.com).



Volunteering for a leadership position in your networking group increases your effectiveness. (L-R) Becky McLaughlin-Treakle, BNI Trainer; Gail Ruppe, Eastern Shore Ambassador; Deborah Frantz, award winning Maryland BNI Director; and Barbara Wadsworth, BNI events coordinator in Anne Arundel County and Taste of the Bay Account Manager.



Marketing presentations can be lively and engaging. BNI chapter president and certified massage therapist, Amelia Mitchell demonstrates her business services with Ernie Kleppen, an AT&T store owner in Edgewater.

over time. Conversations about your child's latest report card or a conflict with your in-laws are best saved for private conversations. When in doubt, err on the side of reserved.

### Use the 'Net for Networking

Most networks enhance their groups with on-line networking resources. Web sites like LinkedIn, MeetUp, and even Facebook and Twitter can help groups communicate information about upcoming events. You can easily start your own networking group using some of these resources or even a simple e-mail list. Ignore these resources and not only will you be out of the loop, you will appear out-dated.

"It's important to remember that networking should be fun—not a chore," says Wilson, who keeps this in mind when planning events for the Crofton Chamber. "The value of networking is that it is the best way to grow your businesses, gain a support system, meet new contacts, and develop relationships." ~

## FIND A NETWORKING GROUP

### Anne Arundel Organizations

Annapolis Chamber of Commerce  
 Anne Arundel Commercial & Industrial Association  
 Black Chamber of Commerce of Anne Arundel County  
 Eastport Business Association  
 Greater Crofton Chamber of Commerce  
 Greater Severna Park Chamber of Commerce  
 North Anne Arundel Chamber of Commerce  
 Pasadena Business Association  
 Southern Anne Arundel Chamber of Commerce  
 West Arundel Chamber of Commerce

[www.annapolischamber.com](http://www.annapolischamber.com)  
[www.aacia.org](http://www.aacia.org)  
[www.bccaac.org](http://www.bccaac.org)  
[www.eastportbusiness.org](http://www.eastportbusiness.org)  
[www.croftonchamber.com](http://www.croftonchamber.com)  
[www.severnaparkchamber.com](http://www.severnaparkchamber.com)  
[www.naaccc.com](http://www.naaccc.com)  
[www.pasadenabusinessassociation.com](http://www.pasadenabusinessassociation.com)  
[www.southcounty.org](http://www.southcounty.org)  
[www.waaccc.org](http://www.waaccc.org)

### Other County and Regional Organizations

Calvert County Chamber of Commerce  
 Chesapeake Regional Tech Council  
 Chesapeake Women's Network  
 Eastern Shore Senior Providers Network  
 Queen Anne County Chamber of Commerce

[www.calvertchamber.org](http://www.calvertchamber.org)  
[www.chesapeaketech.org](http://www.chesapeaketech.org)  
[www.chesapeakewomensnetwork.org](http://www.chesapeakewomensnetwork.org)  
[www.esspn.org](http://www.esspn.org)  
[www.qachamber.org](http://www.qachamber.org)

### National Organizations

American Business Women's Assoc. - Maryland Chapter  
 BNI  
 Entrepreneur Exchange  
 National League of American Pen Women  
 NRG

[www.abwamdcap.org](http://www.abwamdcap.org)  
[www.bnimaryland.com](http://www.bnimaryland.com)  
[www.eesmallbiz.org](http://www.eesmallbiz.org)  
[www.nlapw.org](http://www.nlapw.org)  
[www.networkreferralgroup.com](http://www.networkreferralgroup.com)