



Group helps each other thrive in marketplace

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Jim Overly has an issue. He's found a way to get more business into his Cyber Works computer repair shop, now he has to figure out how to get the work done.

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He's got an architect, an engineer, a blue print shop owner and a jeweler to help him. They and others are members with Overly of one of The Alternative Board's local strategic boards, a gathering of noncompeting businessmen who share ideas, make critiques and generally act as a support group and sounding board. In essence, an alternative board of directors to companies not big enough to have a board.

"Ultimately, we make our own calls," said Joe Pankratz, owner of Avenue Jewelers in Appleton. "It's very, very beneficial to know multiple perspectives instead of one. You get the comfort factor that you are not out in left field because you react to something emotionally."

Overly's strategy is summed up by his advertising slogan, "48 hours or free."

His computer sales and repair shop guarantees that any computer repair or upgrade will be done in 48 hours or the work is free. He has four computer techs and a limited physical space, but business has already increased and usually doubles in the months following Christmas, which is what he's planning for now.

"We have to maintain the same niceness and ability to get things done even though we are doing it twice as fast," he said. "I don't want to keep adding techs. I don't want to work twice as hard for the same amount of money."

After quizzing Overly pretty thoroughly, suggestions flowed: use a triage system, use prices to control flow, think about what to do next when competitors begin matching 48 hours or free.

"I definitely got great advice from the other guys. One of the things we do in that meeting is throw out stuff we are doing, thinking about doing or doing and it's not working," Overly said. "I liked some of the ideas. I've already given them to my service manager to run by his guys."

Alternative Boards are franchised to business consultants, who recruit members, lead meetings and provide one-on-one coaching sessions. The board to which Overly belongs is administered by Michael Audit, president of Benchmark Consultants Inc., Oshkosh. Audit and his partner, Jim Marshall, oversee three groups each.

Audit said the optimum size for a group is seven to nine members. In deciding to invite new members, he looks for a willingness on their part to be open to change and for chemistry, which is critical to a successful group.

"It's really an appreciation that 'there is more potential in this business and I need to get it,'" he said.

Carl Winnekins, president of Architects Group Ltd., Green Bay, who hosted last week's meeting, wants to hire an architect, but one who also understands the marketing aspects of the business. His problem is how to get good information in a litigious-wary business world, where references often provide little of use.

"How do I find the quality prospect employees, getting to the truth, so to speak?" he asked. "You want to hear about the thorns; all of us have strengths and weaknesses. The smaller the company is, the more important it is."

Don Jolly of Trident Automation Inc., Kaukauna, said his company hired two people "after months of interviews."

Pankratz said when he last hired someone, he was trying to hit a home run out of the gate, which was unrealistic. In fact, the group told him at the time he might have to go through eight people before he found the right fit.

The discussion moved on to the advisability of using headhunters versus the cost of doing it in-house.

"The did plant a seed," Winnekins said. "I've obviously thought of this before, but I've never tried to figure out how many hours do we expend on it. We are constantly being bombarded by headhunters, but until you really need them, they are kind of a bother."

Members pay to belong to the group, in return for which they get monthly meetings, individual coaching, a newsletter and other education material. Audit said retention is about 85 percent.

Audit said his biggest competition isn't the myriad other groups and businesses competing for attention, it's the reluctance of business owners to get involved.

"People are very reluctant. They don't know how to ask for help. It's ok to ask for help," he said.

Pankratz said he is overwhelmed with solicitations, but The Alternative Board's offer stood out as open-ended and welcoming.

"There was a real person behind it. I respect not only the group, but Mike as the ringleader. I have found it to be illuminating in lots of different ways," he said.

Overly was not impressed by the first informational meeting he attended, but was intrigued by the idea. A one-on-one meeting with Audit sold him on joining.

"From day one, I was glad that I did. I actually learn more when (members) are talking about their problems or issues than when they are talking about mine," he said.

An original member of the group, Overly said it took some meetings to bond and the first year's discussion tended to focus on everyone's problems. After that, he said, discussion started being more about things members were doing.

Discussion is not always for the thinned-skinned. "They don't come to a meeting for a coffee clutch," Audit said.

"Someone comes up with an idea and they are all hot about it; we might be a little politically correct, but by the end of the meeting, we call a spade a spade," Overly said. "No one is very offended by it."

Pankratz said progress is made as both a group and an individual. As the group matured and credibility was built, he was in favor of members being more blunt.

"We don't have to be guarded in our conversation, thinking that we are giving away the farm," Winnekins said. "We can be kind of open and honest and kind of pour our souls out sometimes."