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### Joining Local Chambers Can Provide a Big Boost

By Julie Bennett

**W**henver Greg Muzzillo, founder and CEO of Proforma, a 720-unit printing and promotional products franchise company in Cleveland, talks to new franchisees, he encourages them to join their local chambers of commerce.

Chamber membership, Mr. Muzzillo tells them, will help them get involved in their communities, network with other business owners and find customers. In fact, it was a chamber of commerce program that helped launch Proforma itself. "I started out with \$200 and a telephone answering machine in the early 1980s," Mr. Muzzillo says, "and I couldn't offer new employees many benefits. But through my chamber, the Greater Cleveland Growth Association, I could provide health coverage that was competitive with that of larger corporations. Being able to hire those employees made our success possible."

A chamber of commerce in Virginia helped launch a second franchise company. In 2002, Mary Rogers and Rosemary Hartnett were struggling to start a children's art education program out of their suburban Washington-area homes. "We needed a real location," Ms. Rogers says, "and someone suggested INC.spire, an incubator for new businesses operated by the Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce. Although their other startups were technology companies or government contractors, INC.spire offered us an office, a phone line, the use of meeting rooms and a business consultant, all for \$700 a month. Their support, and the contacts we made at chamber meetings, helped us become Abrakadoodle, an international franchise with 60 franchisees."

#### "Strong Working Relationship"

Alisa Harrison, communications director of the International Franchise Association in Washington, says that most franchised businesses have a relationship with their local chambers of commerce, although the trade group has no information about others being launched from chamber programs. "At the IFA, we have a strong working relationship with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on policy issues, such as health care, that impact small businesses," she says.

Like most franchisers, Ms. Rogers urges Abrakadoodle franchisees to join their local chambers. "We're a home-managed franchise," she says. "If franchisees need a business environment, to interview new art teachers, for example, their chambers will provide meeting rooms for free."

Wanda Zoeller, co-owner of the double dog dare Proforma franchise in New Albany, Ind., says that she and her partner belong to four different chambers in Indiana and nearby Louisville,



For restaurant franchisees, such as Ritter's Frozen Custard, publicizing your chamber of commerce membership can be a key to customer loyalty.

Ky. "We spend \$1,500 a year in dues," Ms. Zoeller says, "but we have access to lots of classes and networking events. And we've been introduced to large corporations that have initiatives to purchase products from female-owned businesses. We did over \$1 million in business last year, and our chamber memberships played a huge part in that."

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"Join a chamber as soon as you open your first franchise," says Karmen Smith, owner of 10 Anytime Fitness franchises in the Appleton, Wis., area, "but don't expect immediate results." Ms. Smith, who belongs to seven chambers, hosts events, provides discounts to employees of fellow member corporations and offers to talk to members' employees about fitness. Sometimes she even leads lunchtime workshops on proper stretching techniques. Such activities may not translate into additional business right away, "but six to eight months down the road, it will come," she says.

A 2007 study, "The Real Value of Joining a Local Chamber of Commerce," compiled by the Schapiro Group, a research firm in Atlanta, Ga., quantifies Ms. Smith's advice. A survey of 2,000 randomly chosen consumers said that knowing that a small business belonged to its local chamber

of commerce increased by 63% the likelihood the consumer would return to do more business. When the survey group was asked if they were more likely to eat at a restaurant franchise if the owner is a chamber member, half of them said they would eat there more often. The trick, of course, is finding a way to tell customers about your membership.

Sue Goings, of Brighton, Mich., places stickers on the windows of her two Ritter's Frozen Custard franchises in Brighton and Livonia, to show that she belongs to the Greater Brighton Area Chamber of Commerce. She also sells ice cream at chamber events, including the Taste of East Grand River that the chamber organized in 2008 to celebrate the end of a two-year construction project on the area's main thoroughfare, East Grand River Ave. "Now the chamber is working on putting banners on light poles to draw more customers to the area," Ms. Goings says.

While the ultimate goal of joining a chamber may be to draw more customers to your franchise, "you shouldn't use your membership to blatantly market your business," says Mark Nixon, who opened four GolfTEC franchises in the Tampa, Fla., area and joined three chambers — in Tampa, Clearwater and Sarasota. Mr. Nixon says, "I start by joining a relevant committee, like the golf tournament committee, then offer to help with event planning and to sponsor something like the longest drive contest. Chamber membership is about relationship building, although the exposure does bring more people into our training centers for golf lessons."

Jeff Kuschel of New Richmond, Wis., recently

volunteered for the ambassador program of the New Richmond Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitors' Bureau, which he joined in 2009. Mr. Kuschel, a Computer Troubleshooters franchisee, welcomes new businesses to the chamber. "I was at a ribbon-cutting just last week," he says. "New business owners go to the chamber for advice, and I have the only computer repair business in town. I've been open less than two years and probably receive 20% of my business from chamber referrals."

#### All-Round Help

Gary Occhiogrosso, chief development officer for New York-based Trufoods LLC, the parent of the 31-unit Ritter's Frozen Custard franchise, plus Wall Street Deli, Pudge's Famous Chicken and Arthur Treadler's Fish & Chips, says he first joined a chamber of commerce when he was a Dunkin' Donuts franchisee in Queens, N.Y., in the mid-1980s. "That chamber helped me with every aspect of running a small business within that community," Mr. Occhiogrosso says.

"Today our company has 87 units, and I ask all our franchisees to join their local chambers. Membership can help them deal with issues in their communities. And the U.S. Chamber of Commerce can keep them in touch with national issues, like health care and environmental concerns. I believe franchisees and other small business owners are in the trenches every day and, when they do peek their heads out of their shops, the chamber of commerce is there with information they need. Chamber membership," Mr. Occhiogrosso says, "is like a local LinkedIn or other social networking site for small business owners."