

Internet forces businesses to rethink their model

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Consider today's young professionals, with their pod-casting, Web-casting, blog-browsing, socially networking, online work-shopping ways of staying connected.

Now pan over to the local chamber of commerce, traditional organizer of card exchanges, golf fund-raisers and guest-speaker luncheons.

See any problem? Kevin Friedlander did, along with a few fellow chamber executives on the other end of a recent conference call.

"We were talking about how, if chambers are to be relevant 10 years down the road, they're going to have to adapt to how young people network," said Friedlander, a vice president at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

"We're still doing meet-and-greet events at the local Ramada Inn," he said. "But young people entering the workforce in the MySpace age aren't necessarily buying into that."

To some next-gen entrepreneurs, "chamber of commerce" suggests a stodgy institution that might suit their elders, but holds dubious value for them. Chamber members, meanwhile, see cyberspace as a poor means of building the sort of business relationships chambers help foster.

Many young businesspeople are tapping into social networking Web sites that allow them to create online interest groups and share digital Rolodexes. Perhaps best known is LinkedIn.com, with more than 12 million members.

The Web also offers every manner of free business advice, along with on-demand seminars and speakers.

Jordan Adler, a 22-year-old from Tenafly, created a New York City parking guide and is designing an "online whiteboard" that allows remote users to simultaneously sketch and talk. He said he sees the benefits of in-person networking, but has no desire to join a chamber of commerce.

"I rarely even hear the term," he said. "I think everything is the Internet now. When I first started a business, one of the main questions was what kind of entity I should form -- LLC or Inc. I went online and there are maybe 500 sites that defined each term."

Taylor Teresi turns to chamber groups to make most of his personal connections and likes the inter-generational mixing. The 39-year-old owner of a marketing company in Clifton turns to LinkedIn as a "supplement."

"I can see why, in parts of the country where people are more spread out, you might really need something like LinkedIn so you know where to start," he said. "Sometimes I do have to go across the country [to set up contracts for back-office work] so it can be useful there."

On a recent sweltering evening, about 60 members of the Greater Paramus Chamber of Commerce gathered on the outdoor patio of a retirement home for their annual barbecue. Most were in their 40s and 50s.

At one table, members grew animated as they discussed the value of face-to-face conversation.

"People think networking is just pushing your card in someone's face and calling them the next morning," said Edward Sees, a white-haired sales manager in sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt who works for a payroll services firm in Rochelle Park. "They mistake networking for building relationships. That's what chambers help you do."

That's true, said Allyson Johnson, who owns a jewelry business in Englewood. But from what she's seen, young people bring "a fuller quiver to networking than older entrepreneurs," Johnson said.

"I'm not sure they're as in need of the face-to-face as we are," said Johnson, 53. "I do think young people socialize. They just do it in a different way. Will that always lead to business? No. But it could."

Part of the generational disconnect boils down to how people view technology.

"At the end of the day, I don't really want to look at a computer," said Scott Cohen, training director for Children's Aid and Family Services Inc. in Paramus. "It may be a networking tool, but do I want to integrate that tool into my entire life?"

In the quest to stay relevant, observers say chambers should strive to keep their Web sites updated and vital for their membership.

"There's definitely a gap between the traditional way that most chambers operate and the way businesses operate today," said Angela Harrington, chief executive officer and president of Harrington Communications LLC in Springfield.

"Technology to many of them is maintaining a database. But they don't really use their site as an interactive medium."

The Paramus chamber spent \$3,000 to revamp its site 2½ years ago and has since added features such as e-mail reminders of events and a way to pay event fees online. Hits are up past 600 a day, officials said.

Some chambers have taken steps to appeal specifically to young people. The Meadowlands Regional Chamber started a Young Professionals Network for members under age 45. The group is organizing an outing to a Newark Bears baseball game for Aug. 15 and plans to post a two-minute video of the event on YouTube.

The chamber also has added podcasts, online polls and a revolving photo gallery to its site.

YPN's chairwoman, Marina Apolito, 33, hopes to connect with more young businesspeople and ultimately give them a better way of linking up.

"How effectively can you build relationships typing?" she said. "You can never take away the bonding and rapport that happens in person. I think as the younger people evolve they will see the value of personal relationships."

Jim Kirkos, who commands a salaried staff of five as the Meadowlands chamber's chief executive officer, is among those who see consortiums as a key to chamber survival. Kirkos has forged links with the Rutherford chamber, Teterboro Business League and Gold Coast Business Link.

Paramus is part of a 12-chamber consortium that co-sponsors events such as speed networking and links to one another's sites.

"We're keeping the autonomy of all the individual chambers but sharing information and doing events cooperatively," said Paramus chamber chairman Dimitri Miaoulis.

In the end, Johnson said, if chambers don't keep up with new ways of doing business, young people will simply create something of their own.

"Chambers may not be the way to go for the next generation," she said as the last of her fellow Paramus chamber members headed home last week. "If they're warranted, they'll survive. If they aren't, they'll die off and something else will take their place."

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