

Art of Networking

Building Relationships is Second Nature to Cella Quinn

BY MELANIE MORRISSEY CLARK

When Cella Quinn was beginning her career in the 1970s, she was one of few women in her field as an account executive at Merrill Lynch. “There were lots of women working in offices back then, but most were secretaries — there weren’t many women at the executive level. I had no peer relationships, and frankly, it was lonesome.”

Out of this void arose a small gathering of women who began to have lunch downtown once a month. By 1980, five women were meeting regularly for breakfast at the Holiday Inn Central. “We would just get together and talk,” Quinn says.

Over the years, word spread, more women joined, and the Omaha Network was founded. Quinn served as its third president and is credited with giving the organization its structure. “I brought in by-laws, a board of directors and a program committee, and I really believe this structure is what made the organization last,” she says.

The network now boasts 60 members, who still meet monthly for breakfast, but these days not just anyone can join: Membership is by invitation only. “This way, we can balance different industries, because you don’t want to be sitting across from your biggest competitor,” Quinn says.

Now owner and registered principal of Cella Quinn Investment Services, Quinn remains an active member of Omaha Network, and encourages women at all levels to seek out networking opportunities. “Having a varied business network helps you get ahead,” she says. “No woman is an island, and a business network is like having your own Google. You can email or call your network and get an answer to almost anything or an introduction to almost anyone.”

Quinn is quick to point out that networking is quite different from attending a meeting — corporate, volunteer or otherwise. “Networking is women talking and sharing ideas outside of a meeting,” she says. “Serving on a community board means the focus is on the organization. In a network, the focus is on the members.”

Omaha Network offers its members more than the opportunity to share ideas with one



Cella Quinn, business owner, has been instrumental in the success of three separate networks for Omaha women.

another. A program committee secures speakers for each meeting, on topics that can range from self-esteem to self-defense. Quinn says the programs help fulfill the network’s mission to further the individual development of pro-

fessional and businesswomen.

For this networking guru, though, one network is not enough. Over the years, Quinn has developed not one, but two more local networks for women.

She developed the first one for senior-level executives — what Quinn calls high-level decision makers. And she took a creative approach to kicking this one off. “I identified about 32 women who were the city’s top movers and shakers and invited them to dinner,” she says. “I did not give a big presentation, but rather simply had them move to different tables several times throughout the meal so they could meet new people. By the end of the evening, everyone had met, and they all loved it. So we did it again, and began to meet monthly.” This group is called “10” because it first met on the 10th day of the month, and continues to do so.

Then, in 1992, after Quinn had started her own business, she realized women business owners have different concerns than non-business owners, and that it might be helpful to start a network just for them. Today 34 business owners belong to the Good ‘Ol Gals (GOG) network, which offers programs on topics directed at business owners. Like Omaha Network, membership in both “10” and GOG are by invitation only. “All three networks are for different audiences with strong parameters,” she says. “I have gotten a lot of flak for telling women they can’t join, but it’s important to limit the groups. We want women at certain levels in these groups; if we let someone in just because they are someone’s friend and we want to be nice, we limit the strength of the group and its ability to be effective.”

For example, Quinn says, executive women who move to Omaha from another city might be invited to join “10” — giving them an excellent opportunity to meet lots of women in similar positions very quickly. All of a sudden, though they’ve been here only a short time, they have a network.

There is one more network Quinn would like to see started: A network for women who have left corporate America and are no longer working. “This would be for those who have had active business careers but are retired or quit for some reason. These women were never homemakers but no longer have careers to keep them busy. You can only garden and play bridge so much ... they are bored and could really use a network with other women in the same situation.”

If no one steps up to the plate, you never know: Quinn just might do it herself. *W*