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Roundtables aren't just for knights anymore.

By: Denise M. Ziegler

With a focus of bringing together manufacturers, entrepreneurs, and businesses, the Devils Lake Manufacturer's Roundtable was started in August, 2005, and includes members from Devils Lake, Fort Totten, St. Michael, Leeds, and the surrounding area.

Organized by Denise Hendrickson, executive director of the Forward Devils Lake Development Corporation, the purpose of the Roundtable was to introduce and cultivate relationships between businesses and entrepreneurs, as well as providing educational opportunities to members.

Hendrickson started with Forward Devils Lake in July, 2005. Her background and experience gave her the feeling that all area businesses might not know each other and what they each have to offer.

"During initial visits with existing companies in the Devils Lake area I mentioned the roundtable idea and they seemed interested," she says.

She extended invitations to various area manufacturers, businesses, and entrepreneurs, promoting the Roundtable and hoping to tempt them into joining.

"The first meeting went well," Hendrickson says. "And since (then) we keep adding people, there are actually introductions at every meeting."

Part of any economic developer's strategic plan, Hendrickson says, includes business retention and expansion, and the Roundtable "helps keep us in tune with existing businesses as they are the most important part of economic development."

There are no fees charged for Roundtable membership and the group meets quarterly as more often would take too much time from busy members' schedules.

With there being no limits on the type of industries that can join, Hendrickson says, "We have members who are individual entrepreneurs just getting started, up to large businesses like Sioux Manufacturing with many employees."

Take, for example, Dave Oehlke, a certified insurance counselor at Country Bank USA, and also an entrepreneur and member of the Roundtable.

Oehlke was seeking networking opportunities, support, and marketing ideas for an exercise-related invention he has been developing.

"We don't sit around and nit pick each other's ideas," he says. "We discuss concepts and ideas and share knowledge, which helps you grow and stay on track for your goals."

Likewise, Angie Summers, vice president of operations at Summers Manufacturing Company, Inc., with offices in Maddock and Devils Lake, became involved in the Roundtable as an opportunity to meet other businesses and share her many years of business knowledge.

"It's nice to use local resources - especially in our small community," says Summers. "Denise (Hendrickson) is always coming up with something new and helping collaborate with local businesses and keep us all in touch."

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

For every meeting Hendrickson plans an educational topic - the first meeting featured speaker Heather Rank, an international trade specialist with the Department of Commerce out of Fargo.

The educational aspect focuses on making group members aware of available resources, some free or at a reduced cost, and save members time in researching their options.

In addition, Hendrickson encourages the group to talk about different books and resources that could help provide information on marketing and branding, adding that she “purchased the most popular books for the group and they are being passed around for reading by those who are interested.”

BRAINSTORMING ISSUES

According to Hendrickson, the group discusses ideas for resolving issues that many have in common.

“Transportation issues was one of the primary reasons for my being involved in the Roundtable,” Summers says, adding that while her company has four semi tractors, some of the materials needed for their goods are far away and it doesn’t make sense for them to send a truck empty one direction.

Summers wondered what other businesses with similar needs were doing, and thought the Roundtable would be a good way to explore new options.

“It’s nice to meet some of the other companies involved,” Summers says. “The more companies I speak with, the more I see that we have fairly universal issues like transportation, workforce skills and/or availability, and the rising cost of materials.”

THE FUTURE

“We are looking to make our area larger as manufacturers want to know, even at state level, what is out there - as if they need to outsource, they would prefer to do it locally, in North Dakota,” says Hendrickson.

She envisions a time when each region in North Dakota has their own Manufacturer’s Roundtable that meets once a year to network and share ideas.

Five benefits of belonging to a Manufacturer's Roundtable:

- * Networking and support opportunities
- * Educational information
- * Marketing ideas
- * Brainstorming sessions
- * Identifying and coping with similar struggles