

Orange County Chamber of Commerce shows drive

Inventive bid for members hits the road

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Stoked with hot java and imbued with a spirit of purpose, occupants of a four-car caravan snaked through the countryside in search of converts.

The face-to-face membership recruiting effort by the Orange County Chamber of Commerce was far removed from the organization's usual phone-a-thon.

"I'm new here, and I'm looking to try something different," said Bill Fioravanti, vice president of membership development and services since January. "Things need to be reinvented now and then."

Like a general preparing for an invasion, Fioravanti recruited 80 volunteers from chamber ranks to dispatch to nonmember businesses. The volunteers were charged with visiting only those business people they know on either a professional or casual basis.

Goal: 125 new members

Fioravanti wants to bring in 125 new members by the end of May. The chamber's numbers have been decimated by prolonged economic stresses and strains. Membership has dropped to about 1,700 from 2,223 members in 2007. To salve business owners' reluctance to spend money on membership fees, Fioravanti armed his troops with a long list of incentives, including free advertising and admission to business seminars.

Networking makes sense

And then there were the business-building opportunities to network with other entrepreneurs and executives.

"To be blunt, it's just silly not to do it," James LaPenna said of joining the chamber, as he and a half-dozen other members met to launch a recruiting foray from Salerno's Deli and Bagels in the Town of Wallkill.

LaPenna, marketing director for Allways Secure Inc., a security systems provider, said his father, Jim, a contractor, was a longtime member.

"It's a good resource," said James LaPenna, a member of the group's Young Professionals Leadership Council. "It's a great networking, a great marketing tool."

Businesses back businesses

A few minutes later, Fioravanti, Niki Jones, of the marketing firm bearing her name, Cindi Vasta of Vanguard Energy Solutions and Eric Egeland of Capacity Consulting drove to preselected businesses in the Town of Wallkill, followed by a news photographer and reporter.

They first piled into the tight confines of the European Cycle Services office, exuding the excitement of a crew from Publishers Clearing House. After hearing the spiel from Egeland, a motorcycle enthusiast, European's Stephen Saucier said he was interested in researching health benefits available to members, as well as the advertising package.

During a later stop at Mavrix Motor Sports, General Manager Ray Malley was ready to sign on the dotted line.

"I look at it like this: It's businesses supporting businesses," Malley said.

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