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Filling in the Gaps

Local chambers of commerce are helping small businesses stay abreast of the latest technologies

By [RAYMUND FLANDEZ](#)

As the economic storm builds, local chambers of commerce have geared up to help small businesses in a key area: technology.

From Webcasts explaining how to use social-networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn to find job candidates to Web sites where firms can solicit work proposals and network with peers, these initiatives are enabling small-business owners with limited resources to market their services more effectively, find clients and employees and shares ideas, among other things.

The assistance comes at a critical time: Hurt by the credit crunch and pullback in consumer spending, many business owners are more focused on cutting costs and conserving resources than they are on finding technologies that might give them an edge.

Here's a look at the types of initiatives being offered by chambers of commerce across the country:

Bidding on Work

In November, the local chamber of commerce in Nashville, Tenn., launched an Internet portal called BusinessConnect, where chamber members can seek bids from suppliers and offer discounts on goods and services.

A Servpro franchise in Nashville, part of Servpro Industries Inc., a cleanup and restoration company based in Gallatin, Tenn., scored three carpet-cleaning jobs and one air-duct cleaning job from various chamber members after posting a 15% discount offer on the site, says owner Rob Dixon.

"Anything like this for a small business with a limited marketing budget is terrific," says Mr. Dixon.

Among the other tools the chamber is offering: a daily e-newsletter that alerts small-business owners to public-policy issues and news that might affect them, and a series of 30-minute Webcasts in which panels of experts from local industries give advice on marketing and human resources.

"The panelists are really talking about how to get through tough economic times," says Judy Fabling, regional vice president for USr Healthcare, a company that does recruiting for hospitals and other health-care facilities. She says she has viewed all of the chamber's Webcasts, including one that convinced her more of her recruiters should be exploring social-networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook to find candidates for clients. That tactic needs to be employed

"more universally" across the organization, she says.

Finding Talent

In Columbus, Ohio, an organization spun off from the local chamber of commerce is launching a job-networking site in March to help connect technology start-ups with potential employees, many of whom may have lost their jobs in the economic downturn.

This comes at an opportune time, because talent is more readily available, says Ted Ford, president and chief executive of TechColumbus, the nonprofit that is creating the site as part of its mission to help local tech start-ups establish themselves -- by putting them in touch with potential investors, finding them skilled employees and recommending board members, among other things.

InsightETE Corp., a designer of software that monitors the performance of corporate information-technology systems, says it recently repackaged and rebranded a new version of its product at the urging of two board members, both of whom were referred to it last year by TechColumbus.

"Now, it looks a lot more attractive to potential clients and existing clients," says R.C. Wheelless, InsightETE's president and chief executive officer. "Because of our association with TechColumbus, the company is better prepared today to withstand the economic crisis. Not only to survive it, but become a successfully growing company over the next couple of years."

Web Prospecting

In New York, the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce in mid-December held an event at the Time Warner building that drew about 80 to 90 members. The topic: "Web Prospecting: Low/No Cost Practical Tools to Grow Your Business."

A panel of experts gave tips on how to design a Web site that will rank high in search-engine results, market a business through email and reach out to potential clients through sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Flickr.

Greg Barber, president of Greg Barber Co., a printing company in Secaucus, N.J., that uses environmentally friendly ink and paper, says the presentation on Web-site design was right on the mark. "I reached No. 1 stature in Google by following the tips," he says.

Executive and professional coach Joan Katz, of KatzTech in New York, says she attended the event, even though she considered herself well-versed in technology. "Because of the economy, I was more motivated to go and learn new things," she says.

One of the tips she received involved using email-marketing software called Constant Contact to inform previous clients about new workshops she was offering. "I had heard of it, but had never used it," Ms. Katz says.

Online Networking

In Salem, Ore., meanwhile, the local chamber launched an online social-networking site last month, partly because some 80% of its 1,350 members don't attend the organization's face-to-face networking events.

"Businesses are suffering from time poverty like never before," says Kyle Sexton, the chamber's director of member services. "Now you can network without showing up."

Chamber member Tim Fahndrich, president of Third River Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in helping local businesses with Internet marketing, was the driving force behind the site.

"We are in a relationship economy, and people want to do business with those that they know, like and trust," Mr. Fahndrich says in an email. "With online social networking, businesses get a chance to connect with others during the

week and build a much deeper relationship. This turns into referrals and more business."

Mr. Fahndrich says his business has gotten consulting contracts, found speakers and attendees for company events, sold products and found vendors based on recommendations from others.

"We are a social people, and this fits very well with what chambers try to do for their members -- to connect them and to help them stop doing business just out of the phone book," he says.

—Mr. Flandez is a staff reporter of The Wall Street Journal in New York.

Write to Raymund Flandez at raymund.flandez@wsj.com

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