

Often the most common response I get when I ask someone if they are a Chamber member is “No, I didn’t get anything out of it”. Which makes me often think of the famous quote from John F. Kennedy Jr. (in my words) “Ask not what your chamber can do for you, but what you can do for your chamber.”

The small business owner says, “I don’t have time to network”. Take one week and add up how much time you’ve wasted reading emails or jumping on social media during business hours. Did that time have you face to face with anyone? Being involved with the chamber would allow you to spend just one hour of your day at a small business committee meeting getting to know others and learning more about what makes this community strong. Put a “be back in an hour” sign on the door or close shop early to go meet new people or attend a Business After Hours event where 100+ of your future clients and friends are. Your employees would be considered chamber members through your membership too so have a talk about your expectations of them and send them to a meeting for you if you can’t make it.

There are many different networking groups on the Northshore and many focus on either giving back to the community or building relationships through a system of meetings and required referrals. I have done them all. Each has its strengths and weaknesses but I did find as I had come to the Northshore as a stay at home mom from out of state that the natural networks for me were missing. However, the time I invested in several chamber committees gave me the opportunity to speak in front of others which often led to referrals and other local networking groups asking me to speak at their meetings as well. Each time building a stronger network of connections and gaining the needed reputation as an expert in my field.

Another excuse I often hear is: “I need to meet the decision makers of businesses and they are never at Chamber events.” Well I would like to meet Brad Pitt, but my chances are slim to none unless I know exactly where he is filming. These decision makers also have a limited amount of time during the day and cannot waste it on activities that don’t give them maximum benefits. I realized early on decision makers are usually on the board of directors and often will be at chamber luncheons, so I planned early on how to get to know as many people as possible and work my way to get to these board members. The chamber wants people who are invested in the chamber to be a part of their board and it helps to know the different parts and pieces that make the chamber the unique entity it is, but it also helps to build relationships! (See section one: get off your computer or phone and go say hello). Don’t just attend events to hand your business cards out to everyone and not make eye contact but be truly interested in other people’s businesses. Collect their cards and ask to sit down with them to learn more about their business. I received some of my best clients and friends from those opportunities.

Now if you want to be the Chairman of the Board well that is an article for another time. I don’t give away all my secrets because every time I go to a chamber event, I see a younger version of myself trying to get started. Some things you must learn on your own!

Cynthia Thompson
Chairman of the Board 2017
St Tammany West Chamber of Commerce