

THE BUSINESS REVIEW

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DONNA ABBOTT VLAHOS | THE BUSINESS REVIEW

York Bush, left, president of software firm 3GS, talks to Yvonne Vines, a business and industry specialist with the U.S. Department of Commerce, at the SBA Matchmaker program at The Desmond. Bush had 10 appointments with buyers who said they were in the market for information technology services.

Match-making

Company owners make contacts, do business at fast-paced SBA events

BY BARBARA PINCKNEY
THE BUSINESS REVIEW

York Bush knew exactly what he wanted when he entered the ballroom of the Desmond Hotel & Conference Center.

In that room, about 80 buyers—representing 49 federal and state agencies,

educational institutions and large businesses—waited at tables.

Bush, president of Third Generation Solutions (3GS), a Schenectady software firm, and 199 other small-business owners had signed up to meet with them.

Every 10 minutes, a bell rang and the business owners moved on to their next pitch.

It is called “match-making” and this particular event, in mid-September, was organized by the U.S. Small Business Administration. Some private

organizations also hold matchmaker forums.

The idea is to give owners a few minutes to introduce themselves, and their products and services, to someone who might be able to use them.

Think of it as speed-dating for businesses.

Bush had 10 appointments with buyers who said they were in the market for information technology services.

“I thought it went very well,” he said. “At least three had real needs we might be able to meet. And I think if you go to

an event like this, and come away with three leads, that's really good."

A GOOD BUZZ

The SBA also hosts matchmaker days in Buffalo and Long Island. This was the second year for Albany.

Earlier this month, the federal agency announced plans to hold about 200 such events across the country to help firms take advantage of contracting opportunities available under the stimulus package.

Bernard Paprocki, director of the SBA's Syracuse District, said the agency had a "fairly lengthy waiting list" of small businesses hoping to attend the Albany event.

The 200 who were there, at a cost of \$30 each, included architects, engineers, janitorial firms, marketing firms, auto body repair shops and software developers.

Buyers included General Electric, Xerox, the Department of Commerce, State Farm, Knolls Atomic Power Lab, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the Watervliet Arsenal.

"The buzz in that room is just what you want to hear," William Brigham, director of the Small Business Development Center at the State University at Albany, said during the event. "It's the sound of relationships being made."

Karen Zalewski-Wildzunas, a partner in Regalo: A Gift Experience, an Albany corporate gift firm, had six formal meetings and several informal ones.

"It went really well for me," she said. "I got lots of good little contacts and I've already started doing business with some of them."

One of Zalewski-Wildzunas' meetings was with Debra White, manager of supplier diversity for the New York Power Authority. White and her

fellow NYPA representative saw 38 business owners that day.

"You never know where you'll find your next big opportunity," White said. "Sometimes it will be where you least expect it."

FOCUS...FOCUS...

Bush has taken part in several trade shows and chamber of commerce events, but found match-making a bit different.

"It had more focus than other networking events," he said. "At those there is no ability to research ahead of time who is going to be there. I liken it to going to a bar. You may leave knowing the same people you knew when you walked in."

With match-making, however, he was able to do his homework on the buyers, target those with a need for his service, and capture their attention for at least eight minutes. (Two minutes of each 10-minute session are used for movement to the next meeting.)

Bush also took extra care in how he prepared his handouts for the event.

He printed up a corporate overview and a page on each of 3GS' business services, clipped them together with a pen and business card, and put them in a bag.

"That way they knew they had all the information they needed about my firm, but they couldn't flip through the papers while I was talking," he said. "They had to focus on me and listen to what I was saying."

Zalewski-Wildzunas took the approach of picking one message to share with the buyers. She chose Regalo's years-of-service employee reward program.

"Have your 'elevator speech' ready," she said. "Know what you are focusing on and get it out in the first minute. Don't try to give them too much

Quick info

Tips for successful match-making

- **Do your homework.** Research the buyers and create your "A" list of the top 10 you want to meet.
- **Prepare a handout.** Highlight your company's qualifications and unique attributes. Be sure to list any certifications.
- **Be on time.**
- **Dress appropriately.**
- **Review the program** for the most updated list of buyers.

In an 8-minute meeting:

- 2 minutes ... introduce yourself, exchange business cards and give an overview of your business.
- 3 minutes ... describe your products/services, track record and successes.
- 3 minutes ... find out what opportunities you have with the buyer and find out how to follow up

- **Take advantage of other networking opportunities** if you have a break in your meeting schedule. You never know who else you may meet.
- **Follow up after the event.** Be proactive and persistent, but patient.

Source: U.S. Small Business Administration; Alliance Small Business Procurement Fairs

information that will just overwhelm them."

Zalewski-Wildzunas added that the focus needs to start the minute a small-business owner walks into the event.

She got caught up chatting with friends and missed the opportunity to sign up with some of the buyers she had hoped to meet.

"That was a lesson learned from my standpoint," she said.