Linkages and Networks: The Role of Trade and Businesswomen’s Networks

‘If you say that globalization is hurting women, it is because you are not preparing her. I see the potential, how I can ride the crest of the wave and not submerge myself under it… I think a bigger world is where women have a better chance.’ Muhammad Yunus, Co-Chair, State of the World Forum. Yunus also gives credit to the forces of globalization, namely the technological revolution in bringing women of the world closer together, ‘They don’t have to suffer as much since they can integrate and join forces with other women, build support, build networks, and eventually build themselves up’. (Earth News, Rabya Nizam)

Businesswomen’s networks and associations play an important role in developing international contacts and trade. However, it is key to remember that businesswomen’s organizations and networks should not be a substitute for chambers of commerce or mainstream associations but rather as a complement to other business organizations.

Used effectively, businesswomen’s networks can provide an excellent source for supporting each other, developing contacts, business and expanding both nationally and internationally. In almost every country in the world, women are starting businesses at unprecedented rates. Businesswomen’s associations can provide linkages that ensure that women owned businesses can reach their full potential. They can provide training and confidence building. They can provide an entry point into the world of globalization.

This presentation looks at the value and role that businesswomen’s networks can play. This discussion refers to networks that embrace many contacts, associations, chambers and organizations. Many of the issues relate to formal associations but this presentation does not address the details of a formal setup of organizations or associations with by-laws and governances.

Role

Why bother to join a businesswomen’s network? People or firms join networks for a variety of reasons:

- No one works in isolation!
- Personal recognition
- Business contacts
- Political contacts
- Networking opportunities
- Advocacy needs
- Assistance in marketing and sales
- Finding customers
- Having a voice in the business community
- Support
Education
They have an understanding of collective strength through numbers
To acquire skills
To help mainstream women

The role that a network can play is diverse. Different networks exist to address different needs. For women, networks can provide a source of support and confidence which allows them to improve their business prospects and to reassure them that they are not alone in business or challenges. Because women play so many different roles in life in addition to being businesswomen, they can often feel overwhelmed and isolated. Businesswomen’s networks can play an effective role in reducing the feeling of isolation but also in assisting in growing and developing business. A sample of the services and benefits that networks can play is as follows:

- Training – by coming together, networks can provide the critical mass needed to deliver effective and constructive business training for women;
- Advocacy – it is difficult for one voice alone to be heard but a group of voices together makes a difference including influencing policy;
- Linkages – it may be costly for individuals to belong to more than one network but networks can create linkages to other groups, networks and information;
- Mainstreaming – by developing critical mass and numbers, it is easier to become part of mainstream networks, organizations, events thereby increasing visibility and value;
- Credibility – for the group but also for the individual – participating in networks can provide credibility especially for small and new businesses;
- Mentoring – with entrepreneurship becoming a viable alternative for more and more women today, mentoring by established and experienced women provides incalculable value to newcomers and the community;
- Build confidence and connections – by recognizing that one is not alone or that the challenges one faces have been faced by others before, women gain confidence. Businesswomen’s networks provide an opportunity for women to develop more skills and build confidence and connections in smaller groups while learning to access larger networks;
- Build skills – businesswomen’s networks can provide excellent opportunities for women to build skills and help other women by practicing and honing such skills;
- Research to quantify economic contribution of businesswomen – networks can provide the opportunity and intelligence to undertake research with respect to the economic contribution of women, challenges that women face and the trends of women in business. Research can act as a catalyst for change, especially with respect to policy when the true value of women entrepreneurs and the markets they represent are fully understood.

**Developing Networks**

- The demands on the time of women, especially businesswomen can be formidable so in order to gain the most benefit and have the best experience with respect to networks, one should be very strategic. This is a business decision and should be treated seriously. Participating in too many networks or
the incorrect ones, just takes valuable time and energy that can be used building business. Some guidelines for developing a strong network are as follows:

- Networks are only as good as the members – look closely at who participates and their effectiveness and if this is a network that can help achieve your own goals;
- Networks are usually under-funded so require commitments from members and volunteers. Be prepared to contribute time; look at what commitments other network members are contributing;
- Effective networks are well-defined and focused;
- Identify your own needs;
- Recruit other members that will add value to the network;
- Set goals of what you personally would like to achieve and how. Formal networks should also have goals of what the network wants to achieve;
- Give value if the network wants to attract credible participants and repeat participants;
- Setting up a formal network is the easiest part – developing, growing and sustaining are the most challenging;
- Can be time consuming and take time from business so be aware of where your priorities are;
- Networks can be rewarding and fulfilling when they work.

National Linkages

- Typically there are many, many women’s business associations and networks in one country. They can be developed with different mandates, focus on different sectors, have different membership criteria or be geographically based. It is not unusual for women’s networks to be highly fragmented and even political and competitive. This can defeat the overall benefits of representing women in ‘numbers’. Many opportunities exist for businesswomen within their own countries and linkages nationally can provide benefits to help women grow their businesses. Essentially, many of these benefits are the same as a local benefit but exist and create opportunities on a national scale. So, why bother with national linkages?
- The more numbers the more impressive the network is and the more opportunities for synergism and business;
- Advocacy becomes much more effective with larger numbers and it becomes much easier to be recognizable in order to mainstream businesswomen into trade missions, and business events;
- It is more difficult to ignore national networks and larger numbers;
- There are many different structures that a national network can take:
  - National organization with chapters
  - Umbrella organization with member organizations
  - Informal networks
  - Technological linkages
  - Technology is not the only answer but it is a beginning
  - Informal linkages with ‘like-minded’ groups
Can connect ‘remote’ members therefore the role of technology and the importance of infrastructure is very important. Even if not all members have access to technology, networks can provide opportunities to share access with those at the same time as providing training in the use of technology;

Technology may be more costly in some regions but it is still cheaper than print, travel, personal time and will address a larger audience – the world is getting smaller because of new communication methods. Those that learn how to make the best use of them, will be the most effective and dynamic in business and network growth;

Linkages can be formal, informal, strategic partnering, communications, event sharing;

Networks need to educate each other and share the same values – not necessarily the same goals but the same values in achieving goals

Put petty differences aside and do not compete in a destructive manner – this hurts everyone – competition is healthy so learn to make it a positive experience;

Research is important to identify suitable partners and linkages.

International Linkages

We can not underestimate the role that technology can now play with respect to developing linkages and connecting women. While many woman still do not have reliable full time access to technology, there is no doubt that it has become the most reliable and cost effective tool to develop international linkages for networks. Today, there are literally thousands of businesswomen’s associations and networks around the world. All of them are seeking to increase their membership, benefits, networks and enhance member value. International linkages can provide contacts, business opportunities, local intelligence, research and background information that can benefit expanding businesses and save many hours and huge amounts of money in helping to lay a solid ground for accessing international markets. International linkages can provide models for good practices and programs that can be duplicated elsewhere. The concepts for international linkages are similar to those of local and national but on a larger scale and can provide excellent benefits:

Access to international markets;
Access to training and knowledge about international markets;
Credibility to business;
Opportunities for participation in international events which lead to business, alliances and other networks;
Research on suitable partners;
It is not necessarily to stay with women only organizations – why limit oneself;
Should still be strategic;
Need to be careful as they can be costly and time consuming;
Can drain too much time away from business and business development of your company;
New trend of organizing or supporting/participating in ‘women’s trade missions’ – women should not be excluded from mainstream trade missions but often the thresholds for participation are too high or too costly for women business owners
or participation can be intimidating when with the large corporations so women’s trade missions can be a stepping stone to learn, gain confidence, network and develop – these benefits should not be overlooked – and they are usually less costly;

- With the use of technology it is now possible to participate in virtual trade missions either with other countries or between organizations

- Sample of international organizations and other useful websites:
  - The International Alliance for Women; www.tiaw.org
  - Les Femmes Chefs d’Entreprises Mondiales; www.fcem.org
  - International Federation of Women Entrepreneurs
  - African Federation of Women Entrepreneurs
  - Canadian and African Businesswomen’s Association; www.caabwa-afacea.com
  - American & African Business Women’s Alliance; www.aabwa.com
  - African Virtual Business Associations Network; www.abvan.org
  - Center for Private Enterprise; www.cipe.org
  - World Association of Small and Medium Enterprises; www.wasmeinfo.org
  - Center for Women’s Business Research; www.womensbusinessresearch.org
  - Royal Bank of Canada, businesswomen’s website: www.rbcroyalbank.com/sme/women
  - Commonwealth Businesswomen’s Network; www.cbc.to
  - Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada – women’s website; www.infoexport.gc.ca/businesswomen
  - Enterprising women; www.enterprisingwomenexhibit.org
  - U.S. Small Business Administration’s Office of Women’s Business Ownership; www.onlinewbc.gov
  - National Women’s Business Council; www.nwbc.gov
  - International Businesswomen’s Network; www.BWNi.com
  - Global Women Inventors and Innovators Network; www.GWIIN.com
  - Global Summit of Women; www.globewomen.com
  - The Bag Lady; www.bagladyit.com
  - Organization of Women in International Trade; www.owit.org
  - Women President’s Organization; www.womenpresidentso.org.com
  - Business and Professional Women International; www.bpwintl.com

Sustaining Networks

Researching and initially developing linkages is usually the easiest part of broadening networks. Far more challenging is sustaining and maintaining linkages. Sustainability requires a concerted dedication to maintaining contacts created. This does not necessarily mean constant emailing and flooding with literature or inundating with requests. However, a systematic communication plan which allows international networks to know of new developments, products, services or key changes is very beneficial to maintaining an up to date and current data base. Hundreds of international conferences addressing businesswomen are held annually and it is impossible to attend even a hand full. The value of these conferences varies dramatically but many can be hugely beneficial
in increasing the visibility of your business and increasing more contacts and networks. The most important thing is to be strategic and ensure that whatever you invest whether it is time or money (and for most women in the service sector, time is money) you do get a return. Sustaining networks is all about maintaining contacts and interest.

Conclusions and tips

- Make your networks as broad and wide as you can – in business, you cannot do everything yourself
- Women tend to outsource and subcontract more and create a ‘web’ of businesses around them – therefore help to nurture other small businesses particularly service businesses – these all become part of your network
- Work to increase the visibility of women entrepreneurs through celebrating their successes in recognition programs, awards, invitations to speak, stories on successful women and working in a positive, constructive way with media, government, ‘spheres of influence’ and other businesses.