

Forum Confidential

I really, truly, liberally loathe networking events. It's not that I don't like meeting new people (I do), but that I have zero talent or patience for small talk. Or false joviality. Ditto inane weather banter. Call me naïve, but I dream of business networking that's all business. Bottom line? I want networking with value. It's comforting to know that I'm not alone.

A similar search for worth recently motivated Ron Lovett to launch the Atlantic Canada chapter of the Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO). Lovett, 30, is founder and president of the Halifax-based RFL Group of Companies which includes Source Security and Investigations, Castone Construction and Silver IT Solutions. With multiple business activities and more than 1,200 employees under his purview, time is Lovett's most valuable commodity. He has absolutely none to waste. So, when someone like him decides to weight his already laden plate even more (and pay almost \$3,000 in annual fees to do it) you know it's for something really juicy.

The "juice" in this instance is the opportunity to interact with like-minded A-type professionals of a similarly enviable economic bracket. Members meet, talk shop, offer advice, go dog sledding (or skeet shooting). It sounds like it could be the cover for an exclusive dating service for the rich and not-quite-famous. It's not.

Here's how it works: the Entrepreneurs' Organization has 118 chapters around the world, with 7,500-plus members in 38 countries. Much like the more affluent Young Presidents' Organization (which requires members to have organizational net worth of \$10-million or more), EO membership is by invitation only and is restricted to entrepreneurs with annual sales of at least \$1-million (USD). Once accepted to a chapter, you're assigned to a forum which is a group of up to 10 people with similar interests. You'll also be invited to chapter retreats.

Forum meetings, which typically last five to six hours, start with one of the members delivering a presentation on a particular issue or topic. It could be a business or management issue, or it could be a lifestyle issue. Following the presentation, participants ask clarifying questions and the rest of the

meeting is dedicated to brainstorming on that issue.

Retreats are two day events featuring high profile keynote speakers (Lovett's EO launch event at Newcap CEO Rob Steele's private residence included former Major League Baseball star Kelly Gruber, Tim Hortons co-founder Ron Joyce and Stingray Digital Inc.'s co-founder Eric Boyko), learning sessions and assorted mettle-testing recreational challenges like the aforementioned dog sledding.

Lovett admits there's a certain vulnerability that comes with revealing intimate business secrets and personal weaknesses, but asserts that EO is a safe environment for sharing information. "There is an incredibly high level of trust that comes with these groups," he says, noting that forums never contain more than one person per industry, guaranteeing that none of the other participants are your competitor. "If someone tells you something is 'forum confidential', you know that it's of the utmost secrecy and not to be repeated."

He's also comforted by the security of knowing no one is going to hit him with a sales pitch (that'll earn you an automatic expulsion). After all, you don't become a member so you can sell your product or service to other members; you become a member so you can acquire knowledge. At Lovett's first EO forum, he reports getting advice so valuable it more than tripled the return on his membership fee.

It's not just your fellow forum and chapter members whose brains you get to pick either. Approach an EO member in another country or another province, and chances are that doors will open faster and introductions come more readily. It's an experience Lovett wants to share with his regional peers.

By mid-October, the Entrepreneurs' Organization Atlantic Canada chapter had 22 members from across the Maritimes and expects to have 30 within a month. Their first retreat will be held at Fox Harb'r in early December.

Networking sans the awkwardness of forced introductions and fresh-from-the-freezer finger food? Sign me up! But wait, I can't... I don't own a business. Sigh. It's enough to make you become an entrepreneur. | **ABM**



Dawn Chafe

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