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# BusinessOwner

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## Networks not a done deal

**Claire Heaney**

SMALL business operators who don't make the time to network are missing out on valuable sales, a conference has heard.

Networking expert Brenda Thomson told the inaugural Business Mums Network conference in Melbourne at the weekend that businesses not networking were foregoing "endless leads, referrals and sales".

But Ms Thomson warned that people needed to understand what networking was all about.

"Networking is not about making a sale," she said.

"Nobody wants to be sold to."

Ms Thomson, who delivered an

address called *Strategic Networking*, said if people approached a networking event with the predetermined goal of selling products and services they were usually doomed to failure.

Ms Thomson estimated around 80 per cent of business in the marketplace came from networking and referrals.

As a result, she told the audience of primarily home-based business mothers, people needed to spend time networking.

"Networking is about building long-term relationships. People prefer to buy from people they know and trust, or at the very least from people recommended by people they know and trust," she said.

Ms Thomson, the founder and chief executive officer of online direc-

**'NETWORKING IS NOT ABOUT MAKING A SALE. NOBODY WANTS TO BE SOLD TO.'**

tory Networking World, said people needed to undertake networking with the idea of "how you can help others and then give without expecting anything in return".

"However, that does not mean that you have to develop long-term friendships with everyone in the room in the hope that one day they will refer a client to you," she said.

Underlying good networking was the ability to identify and develop mutually beneficial relationships.

Ms Thomson described these as "beneficial win-win business development strategies".

Ms Thomson said networking could be approached in a number of ways.

**REFERRAL PROGRAMS:** One party refers potential clients to the other party and gets financially rewarded if a sale results. She cites the example of a web designer who might get leads from a printer, business consultants and graphic designers. If a referral results in a sale the referring business receives a payment.

**AFFILIATE PROGRAMS:** Ms Thomson said they were a good way to maximise your website by creating an automated referral program.

She suggested businesses find products or services that tied in with their core business to develop affiliate programs.

When the affiliate business gets work through the link from your website you get a payment. But, Ms Thomson, said it was important to ensure any business you developed an affiliation with had a reliable affiliate tracking program.

**STRATEGIC ALLIANCES:** As opposed to the earlier two alliances, in this case no money changes hands.

You need to find a business and work with them if you can be mutually beneficial.

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## The upside of chronic back pain

**Helen Carter**

FELICITY Wood has turned the pain of a bad back into a thriving business which helps thousands of fellow sufferers.

Like many successful business owners, she identified a gap in the market and six years ago started her online business.

After a slow start, it has become a leading website for back pain relief resources and products, with more than 150,000 visitors a month.

It offers more than 500 local and imported products plus information, medical research, a newsletter with a question and answer section, and a discussion forum.

Mrs Wood, 58, who has suffered chronic back pain since injuring a disc in a snow skiing accident when 18, was not daunted by embarking on her first business at an age when many women are retiring or baby-sitting grandchildren.

"Over the years I tried many treatments to manage the pain," she said.

"When I visited different types of health professionals, their opinions differed and I was confused and frustrated. As soon as I mentioned it I found other people were in the same boat."

She spent most of her career in advertising and consulting. During this time she saw the internet emerge and wondered if it was an opportunity to start a business.

"For years I'd wanted my own business, but could not come up with the elusive idea until the

**'FOR YEARS I'D WANTED MY OWN BUSINESS, BUT COULD NOT COME UP WITH THE ELUSIVE IDEA UNTIL THE ADVENT OF THE INTERNET AND ONLINE SHOPPING.'**

advent of the internet and online shopping," she said.

"I'd found no place to go for information and advice about my back pain so I came up with the idea for bad backs. I thought do I open a little shop or do I do it differently and go online?"

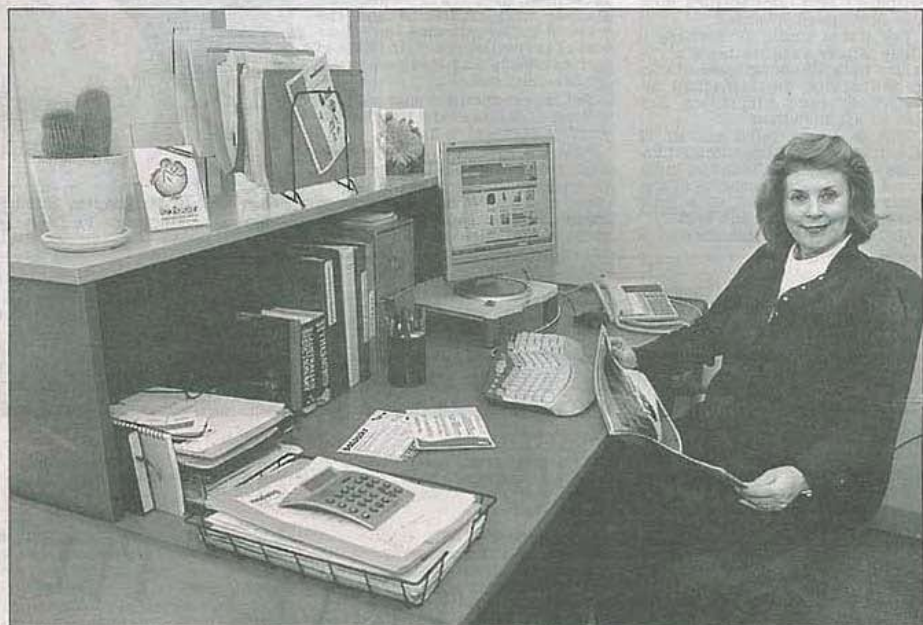
Despite little experience in the health industry or e-commerce, but with good marketing skills, she started the business at home with a small budget.

She "picked the brains" of successful corporate people, including her husband Wayne, a former advertising chief executive.

She wrote a business plan, employed a website developer and contacted manufacturers and wholesalers.

Mrs Wood persisted despite a frustratingly slow initial three years, featuring just 40 products.

The upturn came with consumer acceptance and use of the net, and Jonathan Hulme as business partner. Mr Hulme had worked in medical devices and therapeutic



**Straight talker:** good posture's never a problem in the office of back pain expert Felicity Wood.

goods in the US for 15 years and brought brand awareness.

"He saw us online and thought we could buy some of his products, but we weighed up the options and he joined us," Mrs Wood said.

"He brought well accepted, innovative and good value brands from the US and Europe."

Mr Hulme travels the world attending medical conferences and trade shows, searching for products. They range from ergonomic

furniture to lumbar supports, massagers, pillows, shoulder braces, traction devices and magnetic items.

The selection is largely driven by customer demand and feedback, and sales and feedback show different things work for different people.

Mrs Wood stressed the site was not a substitute for a consultation with a health professional.

"But we've had great feedback. We keep all our emails and they

help our team offer advice about which products helped people with similar pain. It's wonderful helping people," she said.

The company has retail and wholesale stores in Port Melbourne, Sydney and soon Brisbane, and last December launched its US site.

But has the business alleviated Mrs Wood's back pain?

"Definitely, especially since we get to try the products," she said.

Net link: [www.badback.com.au](http://www.badback.com.au)