

Q&A with Sharon Darrow

How Sharon Darrow started the first NAPW local Chapter

[NAPW] You took the initiative to start a local chapter in your area, what gave you the idea?

[Darrow] I joined NAPW to learn from other professional women and to promote my business. Building a new business in our economy is very difficult, so I must use my time and energy rather than methods that cost money. The NAPW search feature is a great tool, but I wanted an opportunity to meet local members and trade ideas. I have worked with Chamber of Commerce groups and LeTip before, but wanted a less restrictive, less costly way to network. Lunch meetings with other members just seemed like the ideal solution -- providing other members were interested!

[NAPW] Can you tell us how you went about reaching out to the local NAPW members? What was the general response?

[Darrow] I was already very pleased with the website search feature and decided to use it to find local members. I made a list of all the cities in the area, and then did individual searches for members in those cities. It was a lot of work to place the information from the profiles into an excel database, but I hoped it would be worth the effort. Then I sent out a mass email introducing myself as a new member of NAPW, explaining my idea of getting together for personal networking and support. The response was overwhelmingly positive - - in fact, I have not had a single email rejecting the concept or my emails! Even those members who haven't been able to make a meeting still have expressed a desire to be kept in the loop. One of the things I did was ask their permission to share the database of local women who had expressed an interest in networking. Everyone who responded liked the idea, but for the sake of confidentiality the database only has information from her NAPW profile. This database makes it easy for members to feel comfortable contacting each other outside of the meeting framework.

[NAPW] Once you had the members, how do you find a place to hold the monthly meetings?

Our first meeting was in a very nice local restaurant that could handle about 20 women, which was the number I was expecting to attend per email responses. Rather than try to get a consensus of so many people, I just picked a date and time and made the reservation. We quickly learned that the place was great, the company was wonderful (a group of complete strangers were friends by the end of that first meeting), but we needed our own room. The restaurant where we had the first meeting was beautiful, but in order to book the room you had to commit to at least 30 people and pay for any people who did not show up. We did not need to start with financial obligations for the meetings, so started looking for another place to meet. My criteria for the next meeting was a private room at a restaurant with mid-range pricing and food, a location that was easy to reach by freeways from different directions, and a place with lots of parking. Our second meeting location worked so well that we reserved our room and time slot for an entire year in advance. Everyone loves the idea that we have an established meeting "home" and a time slot that can be fixed in advance in their schedules. The restaurant loves having us as regulars, and is happy to provide great service.

[NAPW] Tell us about the general structure and flow of the meetings.

[Darrow] We have only had three meetings so far, so we are still evolving on all levels. Right now everyone seats themselves and chats with others until about 12:40 -- this provides time for everyone to place their brochures and/or business cards on the display tables, and gives stragglers a little time to get settled. The meeting order then goes something like this:

1. I start the meeting by welcoming everyone (members and prospects) and bringing them up to date with any information from national.

2. I take a few minutes to review our purpose in getting together. This includes discussing 2 things that epitomizes NAPW to me. First of all, the importance of getting to know the other members and calling them first if you need any type of product or services or if you have an opportunity to refer a friend or acquaintance to them. Secondly, I remind them that NAPW is different from other networking groups in that members are not defined by their careers. The NAPW recognizes and values members as "whole women", with complex lives composed of family, career, hobbies, special interests, etc.

3. Next, everyone in turn stands up to introduce themselves to the group and talks about whatever they wish to share. There are no rules about time or subject matter, so we may hear about their business, a special charity or hobby function, a personal triumph, etc. One time one of the prospective members had just been laid off. She talked about the shock of having the whole department eliminated after about 12 years and what her skills were. We are all thrilled when another member invited her to talk later and offered to assist her in her search for a new position.

4. After each person has had an opportunity to speak we take a short break so everyone can pick up whatever handouts they are interested in and to talk a little bit to women seated throughout the room.

5. Our guest speaker is then introduced (after she gets to finish her lunch!) and speaks for about 15 minutes. When she finishes with her talk and with answering any questions from the group, we thank her and close the formal part of the meeting.

That pretty well sums it up. We are informal, but our goal is to make sure everyone participates and contributes while still taking care that our time is not wasted. We respect one another's schedules and want to be sure everyone can get back to work or to their next appointments promptly.

[NAPW] What are some topics you discuss?

[Darrow] We always discuss what we have heard from national NAPW, what is happening with all of us (businesses, special happenings, etc.), and whatever topics the speaker introduces. Last time I brought a terrific book (from one of the NAPW speaker recommendations), "The Girls' Guide to Building a Million-Dollar Business" and talked about it. The book got passed around (several people took notes on the author and title), and the suggestion was made that we include sharing books or other helpful media as part of the individual talks. There also might be a short impromptu discussion responding to a topic introduced by an individual during the introductions.

[NAPW] Tell us about an inspiring moment at your local chapter meeting?

[Darrow] It is hard to think of a single inspirational moment, especially since we have just had 3 meetings. The inspiration for me comes from the little things and the energy that is exchanged. Our first meeting was a group of total strangers, but I was so touched by the people who came to me before they left just to say how much they enjoyed meeting everyone and how much it meant to them to have the opportunity to get together and share. Another great moment for me was at the beginning of our last meeting, watching the smiles of recognition as women came in and saw the others. At our last meeting one of our people, Ramona Herriford, told us that she had been asked to serve on a very important community board. The applause and congratulations she got clearly demonstrated the pride we all felt in her and her accomplishment. These meetings do not have incredible inspirational moments, but we are clearly forming relationships that are inspirational and important for everyone that attends.

[NAPW] NAPW will be helping you generate some local press for your local chapter. We will ask you to have someone put together a detailed press release, which we will copy edit and release. How do you think this will help your chapter?

[Darrow] That will be of tremendous help for us. The local publicity will help us as individual members, will help highlight the NAPW itself by featuring the local members and group, and will also help us reach

local members through publicity instead of my spending hours searching the website for new members to invite to the next meeting.

[NAPW] What's next for your chapter?

We are evolving as we go, but several ideas have been brought up already. We will keep having guest speakers to teach and inspire us. We will keep inviting prospective members and refining the process of welcoming them and encouraging them to join NAPW for the benefits that we discuss and demonstrate. We will keep discussing the website features and membership benefits to encourage all of us to get the most out of our memberships. Long-term, I expect us to form a dynamic network of experts and specialists that we all access first whenever we need something. I also expect that the relationships we are forming will blossom into vital friendships that will provide personal support and assistance over and above the business support.

I have also thought that we might even be able to sponsor an evening or weekend public event where our members could have booths to feature their products or services. And maybe just for fun we could have a summer picnic or purely social event where we can meet with our families and get to know one another in a totally different atmosphere. These are just some of our ideas; the future is truly open for whatever we decide to do!

I have been so incredibly impressed with the women I have met in person or even just by email through NAPW that it is hard to express. I think we are all very proud of each other and the group and feel much less alone as we work hard in a tough economy. We are all growing, having fun together, and enjoying hearing about one another's lives each time we meet.

