

***Pay It Forward:* The Lifeline—and Lifespan—of Business Networking**

By Cathie Beck

Teah Bennett, founder and president of I*LEVEL Incorporated, an Englewood company that offers businesses a human capital management software suite—and Gerry Wienholt, president of PEP Incorporated, a Denver motivation, training and consulting enterprise—knew nothing of each other until Colorado Company magazine’s publisher, Candy Campbell, said to Bennett one evening at a business function, “I’ve got someone *you’ve got to meet.*”

Today Bennett and Wienholt are business partners in more ways than one, though the introduction was innocuous at first glance. “Gerry and I met casually because of a nice introduction,” says Bennett. “But a lot more than that has come from that first meeting. Gerry, as it turns out, was looking for a product to use in his consulting business, something that would elevate and streamline his process. I*LEVEL, we soon found out, was the perfect solution for him.

“Right now, our partnership has evolved and he is a reseller of the I*LEVEL product—so he’s taking our product to all of his customers.”

Without any payoff for herself, her magazine, her career or her publishing house, Campbell ignited a business synergy that illustrates what Bennett calls the “Pay It Forward” approach to networking in today’s business climate.

“Most business people would say they’d rather do a million other things than network,” says Bennett. “That’s because they’re expecting an immediate return and that doesn’t happen. It takes time. Going into networking, you need to go in with a goal, and that goal is not something that you need today, but just the connection.”

Bennett has loads of experience in the business networking game. In addition to her last four years of growing the I*LEVEL Incorporated product, in 1998, she founded and is co-partner in IT Jazz, an Englewood technology and executive search firm. “It’s key to approach networking with a generous, what’s-in-it-for-them demeanor,” she says. “Decide ahead of time that you’re going to be the person who helps someone first; you’re going to be the example. Remember: Networking takes time. People get discouraged thinking they’re going to get something for themselves or for their business on that day or that evening or at that particular event. Instead, it works much better for everyone if you simply know that all you’re going to do is just try to find a common ground for a relationship.”

Wienholt has spent the last nine years regularly delivering PEP Incorporated’s mission to companies like Prudential Insurance and Rolls Royce—that mission is: Define Purpose, develop Excellence, and discover Passion. He emphatically echoes Bennett’s thoughts, but adds that the relationship element inherent in networking is also smart, that he instills networking as part of a savvy business strategy. “Networking is critical to any business’ success,” he says, “particularly in today’s business environment.”

But like Bennett, he cautions against a self-win attitude, and suggests, instead, an approach of selflessness. “One’s networking approach has got to be in a mind-set of mutual win-win. You can’t be selfish.”

Given Wienholt’s years of building his own business—while counseling other businesses in their own growth goals, Wienholt says that he’s reaped innumerable benefits over the years with his approach. “I network all the time,” he says. “In fact, I may be too networked. The opportunities are outrageous.

“But I believe this kind of win-win networking goes beyond a business strategy,” Wienholt adds. “It’s really about life, it’s about people and relationships. And believe me, it all comes

back to you—I counsel my clients that the opportunities come out of the woodwork when networking is approached with trust and giving in mind.”

To help his clients cement the give-and-exchange element of Wienholt’s networking philosophy, he employs a specific strategy he calls “WITY” (pronounced *witty*) and “LPGA.” “I use two acronyms when I meet someone and both help me tremendously,” says Wienholt. “WITY stands for What’s Important to You, and LPGA—Listen, Probe and get Affirmation.

“When I sat down with Teah,” he adds, “after the small talk, I wanted to know what was important to her. What’s *important* to the person I’m networking with is critical.

“Then I listen—with good eye contact,” he says. “And I ask a lot of questions. I ask, Why? five times to get to the heart of the issue. That’s the probing. It’s a tool, it’s conscious. It’s an exchange that takes you beyond the superficial. It takes you beneath, to the heart of the matter.

“Finally,” he says, “I make sure of the ‘GA’ part of the acronym. The get Affirmation. I repeat back what I think I heard. I make sure I understand them as much as possible. This is *active* networking.”

All of which seems to be paying off for Bennett and Wienholt, as their relationship actively grows—from one simple, no-agenda introduction, to a cohesive partnership. “We first met just for coffee,” says Bennett. “We didn’t have any agenda; we had no expectations at all.

“But all that’s changed,” she adds. “We’re thrilled to be business partners, working and growing both of our respective businesses—it’s supportive, and it’s a productive synergy we wouldn’t have had without that one introduction.”
