

# Battling Loneliness As an Entrepreneur

## Plus when to follow up after responding to an ad

BY TAUNEE BESSON

*Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential.*

**Q:** Ten months ago I started a consulting business and, so far, income and expenses are on target. In fact, I have a little more business than I anticipated.

However, something completely unexpected has happened. I'm lonely. It never occurred to me while I was buying furniture, setting up a home office, developing brochures, etc., that I would miss having colleagues. While I have lots of people contact, there are no peers to share my ideas, triumphs and disappointments. My wife is supportive and interested, but she has a successful career of her own. I'm not unhappy enough to become an employee again. I enjoy the freedom, flexibility and income of an entrepreneur, but I could use some suggestions for building professional relationships. Aside from finding a partner, what else might I do to regain the sense of teamwork my corporate position used to provide?

**A:** Entrepreneurs working at home can easily feel isolated unless they make efforts to reach out to others in their professional community. Yours is a common problem that prevents many qualified people from starting businesses. Fortunately, there are many avenues for increasing peer contact while maintaining autonomy.

- Business lunches are a great way to get out of the house to share ideas with friends and fellow business owners. It will cost you a little more than a trip to the refrigerator, but it's 80% deductible as a business expense. Besides, the worthwhile relationships you'll build are worth the cost.
- Professional organizations are full of contacts who have similar interests. Sometimes they offer access to specialized subgroups for colleagues with similar backgrounds. Consider attending several meetings as a guest to decide if you want to join. If you do, attend all monthly meetings

*Ms. Besson is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas-based firm specializing in career development and job search programs for professionals and corporations.*

and serve on at least one committee. The more involved you become, the greater your return.

- Conventions, one-day seminars and continuing education courses provide opportunities to meet other business owners and discuss common problems and strategies. People who attend them usually are interested in exchanging ideas and information and maintaining ongoing contact.
- Volunteering your time and expertise can put you in touch with professionals whose company you'll enjoy. Tackling a tough problem as part of a team can help you re-capture the camaraderie your business doesn't provide, and you'll have the satisfaction of contributing to your community.
- You might want to re-figure your budget to see if it will accommodate an office in an executive

### Business lunches are a great way to get out of the house to share ideas with friends and fellow business owners

suite. Many small businesses choose to rent space where they can have a small office plus access to a conference room, typing, phone answering, mailing, copying and bookkeeping services for one monthly fee. Chances are you'll find at least a couple of other "suite mates" worthy of your time and friendship.

- As you become acquainted with other entrepreneurs, you can form a group of five to 10 for a weekly or monthly "success" group meeting. Use them to discuss business strategies, problems, sources of new clients, goals or any other issues that will contribute to the advancement of the group. Over the years, the members will become trusted confidants who will refer business to each other, brainstorm ideas or provide consolation if necessary.
- You may want to develop a joint venture. As you find other consultants with complimentary interests, look for potential businesses you can build together. Joint ventures don't require you to form a full-time partnership, yet they offer a terrific opportunity to pool your talents and resources on

projects you might not tackle on your own.

If you try some of the above suggestions, you can keep your autonomy and balance it with the teamwork you're lacking while attracting business through expanding your network of contacts.

**Q:** How long should I wait before sending a follow-up letter to a potential employer who hasn't responded to an application letter and resume? Also, where can I find information about "professional" employment opportunities aside from newspapers?

**A:** Given that your second question refers to newspapers, I assume the letters and resumes you're sending are in response to want ads. If this is true, there's more than one answer to your first question.

Ads that contain employer names are easy to follow up on because you know who to contact. In fact, a smart applicant will find out the personnel director or recruiter's name and address the cover letter to him or her specifically. After a week to 10 days, call to make sure your resume has arrived, answer any questions about it and hopefully schedule an interview. At the least ascertain the time frame for the selection process and where you now stand.

Unfortunately, ads that list a box number without an employer present a real problem because you have minimal information. Without knowing the company, you can't call anyone. You're left in the dark, waiting to hear about the next step. While some organizations send polite form-letter rejections, others only contact those they wish to interview. The interviewing process may drop in the firm's list of priorities and start weeks after expected, but you won't know this either.

Three weeks to a month is a safe interval for following up on a blind ad. A short letter indicating your continuing interest in the position may get a response, especially since few applicants bother to pursue the job beyond sending a resume. Potential employers appreciate enthusiasm and perseverance. Most job seekers miss an important opportunity when they worry about being overeager.

One way to avoid questions about when to follow up on a help-wanted ad is to rely on other job search methods instead, particularly networking. As I've mentioned in previous columns, 80% to 90% of positions are filled through networking. Potential

*Continued on Next Page*

# Your turn to ask

Cont. from Preceding Page

contacts are all around you, but you'll have to do a little work to find them.

Some sources are:

- *Friends and family.* Ask the people who know you best if they're acquainted with others in your chosen field. Then call those referrals for potential opportunities.
- *Business colleagues.* There is a grapevine among professionals. They often know about job openings within their own companies and at their competition.
- *Professional organizations.* These groups have both informal and formal job banks. Attending

---

## Three weeks to a month is a safe interval for following up on a blind ad

---

their meetings and checking job listings can uncover some interesting opportunities.

- *Churches and fraternal groups.* Most churches and fraternal groups have members representing many careers and personal networks. Tell key people you are looking for a new position and the word will spread.
- *Volunteer organizations.* Some of the best referrals come from those dedicated to a common mission. Ask other committee members who they know in your field.
- *Hobby groups.* Any type of common interest forms a bond among those who share it. Whether you run, fly model airplanes or play chess for fun, your fellow enthusiasts will be anxious to help you find career contacts. And you may be surprised at how many they know.
- *Continuing education seminars and conventions.* Along with up-to-date information and techniques, these provide wonderful opportunities for networking with other professionals who may be aware of current job openings. ●