

Matchmaking

Showcase introduces urban technology companies to rural businesses

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Robyn Snyder knows what she wants in a relationship. That's why she's hanging around the ballroom at the Holiday Inn Tysons Corner in McLean on a blustery afternoon. She's searching for a long-term, dependable partner who will listen to her needs. Somewhere out there is a perfect match. All she needs is an introduction.

As Snyder, a supply representative for Lockheed Martin Corp., slips into her seat, she's paired with her first possible match. She peers over her reading glasses at the two casually dressed younger men. Rather than play games, she decides on a straightforward approach, explaining how Lockheed's Maritime Systems & Sensors division needs partners that can build out submarines — not aircraft. "That would be a great fit for us," responds Paul Parks, vice president of sales and marketing at Omnitech Engineering of Lynchburg, who has been busily taking notes across the table.

Parks has less than 30 minutes to make Omnitech's case and to leave a positive impression. Soon, his seat will be taken by a representative from another small business who will make a pitch to Snyder and two other Lockheed representatives in the hope of forging a deal with one of the nation's largest defense contractors.

Across the ballroom, about 10 similar conversations are taking place. Welcome to the business version of speed dating, officially known as Virginia's Linked Workforce Showcase. Just as speed dating enables people to quickly rotate among tables in search of relationships, Showcase events give small Virginia firms a chance to sit down with large Northern Virginia defense contractors and telecoms, with the hope of eventually landing a lucrative contract.

The nearly three-year-old program run by Virginia Economic Bridge Inc. (VEB), a nonprofit based in Radford, aims to create strategic business partnerships primarily between Northern Virginia and rural Southwest Virginia companies. The events are funded through company-paid fees, sponsorships, corporate contributions and donations from local economic development agencies.

Business networking events are nothing new. Local chambers of commerce, economic development agencies and industry associations host thousands of them nationally each year to give companies exposure. What sets Linked Workforce events apart, beside the speed-dating format, is the preparation beforehand.

Several state agencies are involved in the matchmaking. The Virginia Economic Development Partnership and the state's community colleges identify emerging or in-demand industries, such as homeland security and telecommunications. Then local economic development agencies pinpoint companies with the capacity to serve large Northern Virginia companies,

frequently government contractors. Companies who want to participate are prescreened by VEB and prepped for the meetings.

"We work with companies to get them to the point that they come into this event and they are really ready to do business," says Carl Mitchell, VEB's president and CEO. "We're not going to bring them up here if they're not ready, and the Northern Virginia companies know it's like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval."

VEB is hoping to partner with the federal Department of Homeland Security for a June showcase to help create opportunities for small firms in that rapidly growing sector.

The prescreening and prematching of potential partners is one of the program's strongest selling points. The preparation, say company officials, helps them avoid the many pitfalls that beset networking events. "This is a little more focused, and it's a little more intimate and provides a more meaningful experience," says Anne Donahue, vice president and director of contracts for Fairfax-based SRA International.

Within 15 minutes of arriving at a showcase, Donahue knows exactly which presentations she wants to hear. Since July 2003, SRA has sent representatives to four events. VEB even organized an event specifically for SRA, an information technology services firm, to meet with a handful of companies at Radford University last year.

For small businesses looking to break into government subcontracting, it's a priceless opportunity. "You have supposedly the decision makers sitting across from you. How much would that cost you in time and phone calls?" asks Parks, whose meeting with Snyder has led to follow-up discussions.

During the recent showcase at Tysons Corner, which focused on computer programming and software development, some pairings looked more like bad blind dates than potential marriage material. Byron Hudgins, CEO of C.R. Hudgins Plating, Inc. of Lynchburg, was looking for metal plating work, but the Lockheed group had no need for his products. The result was nearly 20 minutes of small talk, with Snyder suggesting that Hudgins contact the manufacturer of a dog-grooming table that she uses at home to see if it might have a need for his products.

Though Hudgins walked away discouraged, Snyder offered him tips to identify contacts and potential markets within Lockheed's dozens of other business units. "If you don't do that you're wasting your time because you're marketing to the wrong groups," she advised. "It's like when somebody sends me something on an airplane wing and I do submarines."

VEB tries to give each participant at least four matches, says Mitchell. Typically, participating companies from Southwest Virginia prepare a five- to six-minute presentation. VEB helps companies craft their pitch, which may include dress rehearsals or brainstorming sessions. Larger companies give brief 30-second summaries of their business.

Then the fun and networking begins as the sounds of conversations from about a dozen tables fill the room. Companies have about 25 minutes to sell themselves before the process begins anew.

While some good relationships have begun, signs of success, so far, are only anecdotal. Like many participants, Donahue can't point to any contracts or signed deals. Yet like others, she praises the program. "We're pleased with who we meet and we're happy to spend our small business outreach dollars with VEB because it provides us better leverage than a mass attendance event," she says, adding that the conversations are more substantive than they usually find at trade shows.

After nearly three years, several companies have scored some work, but most of the deals have been worth less than \$100,000 each. Still, firms optimistically point to promising leads and networking connections that didn't exist before they attended a showcase event. "This is an 18- to 24-month process," says Mitchell. "We're identifying partners and solidifying relationships."

The ultimate goal is not to help a small business land a whopper of a contract, though nobody would complain about that. The purpose is to foster mutually beneficial long-term relationships. With 80 percent of economic growth nationally coming from existing businesses, those relationships can prove fruitful over time. Though "no checks have been written yet," says Henry Bass, president of Automation Creations, Inc. of Blacksburg, "they've put us in touch with some of the prime contractors that we would have been unable to get face time with."

Several large contractors have added Automation Creations, a developer of custom software, to their small business databases, and SRA identified the company as its top candidate for one government project that was ultimately cancelled. Another firm, which Bass can't name yet, has also named Automation Creations as its preferred subcontractor on a government contract that could be worth up to \$15 billion for small businesses.

With the program celebrating its third birthday in July, organizers are hoping for more tangible successes. "This is the year they are looking at real jobs and contracts," says Mitchell. One reason for the delayed success is that many of the relationships are dependent on government contracts, which can take several years to finalize. As they put together teams to bid on federal contracts, several larger participating companies are looking for partners, especially minority- or veteran-owned small businesses from underutilized areas such as Southwest Virginia. They are highly sought after because of federal contracting requirements that frequently specify that one-quarter or more of the subcontracts go to small businesses. Minority- and veteran-owned businesses get preferential treatment in federal contracting and can give a team an advantage.

The jury, though, is still out on whether the Linked Workforce showcases provide an opportunity for mere flirtation or something more serious. But participants are sold on the concept. "I think they definitely deliver what they promise," says Omnitech's Parks.