



Iain Black, president and CEO of the Vancouver Board of Trade, says membership offers small businesses the chance to be part of the board's role in shaping public policy.

Peter Taylor

## **Joining board of trade can bring small businesses big rewards**

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It's a question that comes up at some point in the life of most small businesses: Should I spring for membership in the local board of trade?

The answer: In most cases, it's good to be a joiner.

"Boards of trade offer small businesses the opportunity to tap into experienced resources," says Peter Constantinou, a Toronto accountant who has worked with many small- and medium-sized enterprises.

"Joining can help you grow. Being a member lets you source valuable information and learn about industry trends."

Mr. Constantinou's view, shared by many business owners and advisers, is that, while there is a cost to membership, it's a net benefit for small business owners and operators to belong to a business organization such as a board of trade or, almost identical, a chamber of commerce.

It can benefit your business's social network and provide a sophisticated, professional inroad into the political structure of your community. Belonging to a board of trade can offer direct, tangible economic benefits, too.

It does cost – anywhere from about \$300 for a one-person owner with a home office to join the Ottawa Chamber of Commerce, to \$1,500 or more for small businesses that have grown toward 50 employees.

But the cost is tax-deductible, and the benefits can start flowing immediately.

Joining the Toronto Board of Trade as an individual business owner costs \$475, for example, but that comes with an instant \$200 credit toward networking events and other board programs.

“Typically, there are three different ways in which we can create business value,” says Iain Black, president and chief executive officer of the Vancouver Board of Trade.

“The first is through the networking we have to offer, trade shows, and the opportunity to make direct contact with other businesses.”

Vancouver's board now averages two such trade shows a month, and all of them sell out, Mr. Black says.

The second benefit for small businesses is “the more transactional element,” Mr. Black says. By this, he means the membership perks that come with joining a board or chamber.

These benefits vary from city to city, but typically they include:

### **Coupons and special offers**

The Ottawa Chamber of Commerce offers coupons to members for discounts on cellphone service, advertising, auto club membership, accounting services and business training courses. The Halifax Chamber of Commerce offers member discounts from participating companies on office products, car and truck rentals and a member-to-member marketplace – sort of like a members-only Kijiji or Craigslist.

### **Member discounts**

Member discounts can include regular discounts on gas, processing credit card transactions and, importantly, group insurance for extended health benefits and dental

care under policies, and at rates that normally would be available only to larger firms. Joining a board gains you access to these at a preferred group rate.

Mr. Black says that his board has also negotiated fleet prices for new car purchases. “Members who take advantage find this alone pays for the membership price.”

### **Events, awards and networking**

The Toronto Board of Trade offers more than 100 events for members each year – that’s nearly two each week. During Small Business Week, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce hands out Small Business Week Awards, for innovation, customer service, community involvement, environmental stewardship and a break-out business award for an up-and-coming small firm.

The third benefit, Mr. Black says, is that joining a board offers your small business the chance to be part of the board’s advocacy and its role in shaping public policy.

“It’s not just advocacy for traditional issues like lower business taxes and better public transit, but important issues that define the kind of community we’d like to create – issues like sustainability on the environmental side, mental health and homelessness,” he says.

“There’s a group benefit that comes along with being part of an organization,” says Jacqueline Baptist, Toronto Board of Trade’s vice-president of marketing and communications.

“We can speak in an objective way on behalf of businesses, not just for enterprise-sized [large] companies.”

Joining a board also gives small businesses access to the larger companies that also belong. This can be especially important for small businesses seeking to expand to new or unfamiliar markets – the Halifax Chamber of Commerce can provide an entrée into Atlantic Canada, for example, and the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal can be a gateway into Quebec and elsewhere in francophone Canada.

“Networking is critical,” says Montreal-based public relations consultant Deanna Drendel.

“At some point, we all need a pool of contacts – whether it’s to find a like-minded, complementary soul with whom to join forces for a pitch to a new client or to be able to refer a good resource to a colleague who needs help.”

Joining a board means you can give as well as receive, she adds. “The elevator has to go both ways ... It’s also about giving back and about serving – on committees and boards, to do your share to make the organization stronger.”

The opportunities are boundless, Ms. Baptist says.

“We have about 10,000 members, and two-thirds of them are small businesses with 100 or fewer employees. You get access to an enormous group of peers, whom you can do business with and learn from. It can help you grow your business, make better decisions, build your team – or just have your voice heard.”

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