

Cruising for connections

Women go to sea for 3 days of networking with men

By MARGARET BENNSTEN
PLAIN DEALER STAFF WRITER

MIAMI — Appreciatively, I stepped into the registration area. I had just boarded an ocean liner for The Possible Woman Cruise, a seminar all-sea. For executive women, and expected to have to introduce myself to clusters of women in suits and beads chatting over champagne.

But when I found the well-attended group I was seeking, it looked more like a well-oiled bracket brigade. Women were coming to the aid of Linda Wanda, organizer of this first-time cruise; a copy shop disaster had left her with thousands of pages of registration information that needed to be stuffed into binders.

Not a problem. Upon hearing the story, every registrant quickly rolled up her sleeves and joined the assembly line.

I couldn't help but smile as I took a look at the women. Here was a roomful of entrepreneurs and corporate executives who save time networking and collating, but, I suspect, had been intimate with such clerical duties in previous years.

We got the job done quickly, all the while laughing and getting to know each other. Women were in a state of frenzy when people walk into a store and don't know what it's all about. Now, a Pepper Pike sales manager for the Caribbean Cruise Line was here to present workshops on dressing for success.

A blast, and a blast

And then with a waltz in Miami pier, gliding into a Bahamy January afternoon and suddenly dependency. Before we would dock again in Miami, lasting contacts had been made and at least one deal had been closed.

It was the only vacation Betty L. Siegel, president of Georgia's Renaissance State University, and her husband, Steve, could call her office once — a fact she found amusingly coincidental.

"There ought to be some time in your life when you can take off of your own schedule and have a vacation and affirmation," she said. "We ought to be smart enough to figure out some of our own's efforts back home."

That sense of complete detachment was the reason Wind decided to put the event on a ship. "There are no phones, no fax machines. A three-day cruise is relatively short, but basically you have a closed environment where someone needs to jump ship," explained Wind, a former women's seminar and corporate staff development programs. "It really gives women an opportunity to relax, instead of being driven by the external forces that impact our lives from 9 to 5."

Dr Bahamas-bound ship was the Learward of Norwegian Cruise Lines, but we had an agenda separate from regular cruise-



Dressed formally on the sight of the captain's ball room, from left, speaker Betty L. Siegel, cruise organizer Linda Wanda, speaker Marjorie Barlow and photographer Jane Holmes.



For one January weekend, the Learward became a floating classroom for female executives and entrepreneurs attending The Possible Woman Cruise.

gers. As folks in T-shirts and flip-flops did the macarena around the pool below, we met for a private orientation — 135 women from 18 states who had event and decided to see what it was all about.

Networking

As it turned out, it was about networking. In a big way. The Jan. 9-12 trip, dubbed the "the schmonie cruise," delivered an environment where you could pass your business card unashamedly. Before we would dock again in Miami, lasting contacts had been made and at least one deal had been closed.

Echoing through the daily keynote speeches, the workshops and even morning conversations was the same theme: women helping women.

Keynote speakers offered earthy advice on getting ahead in the workplace. Barbara L. Pagan, president of an Atlanta-based company specializing in leadership and team development, urged the women to ask a co-worker to give them a critical once-over on their appearance and mannerisms.

Women have been conditioned to be "good girls" at work, but don't be too eager to please, advised Pagan. She told the story of a woman who had the unfortunate habit of smiling and nodding unthinkingly during conversations. But once she was made aware of it, she was determined to stop. Soon she was called in for a meeting with a potential employer, so she practiced talking without expression. In the meeting she was offered \$120,000. She fought the urge to smile delightfully and kept her face neutral. Seconds passed.

Finally, Pagan said, the other guy blinked: "OK, \$150,000 and not a penny more," he told her.

Complete package

Wind said it was important to have experts like Pagan on hand to address not just professional development, but women's mental, physical and spiritual well-being as well. Sessions included using intuition as a decision-making tool, holistic health and tai chi.

But more effective than any her-by-low-you-do lecture was the chance to see the best of the best, in action. Siegel, who was the 1997 Georgia Woman of the Year, delivered a keynote speech that had women lined up afterward to thank and hug her. (One woman declared to her, "I'm in love.")

Of speaking without notes and introducing herself as a coal miner's daughter who grew up in Kentucky "back when the earth was cooling," Siegel gave a riveting talk punctuated with colorful stories.

She recalled a trip to California where she saw a majestic forest of sequoia trees and wondered aloud if the roots reached all the way to China. Oh, no, said her guide, sequoias actually have very shallow roots. But the secret of the sequoias is that each tree links its roots with those of its neighbors, creating a sturdy underground network. "That's why you never see a solitary sequoia," Siegel said, urging her audience of women to emulate the trees' example and come together to empower each other so that all can stand tall.

Remembering others

Anxiously, a powerful moment came when marriage and family



Danielle Turcota of Twinburg, who read about The Possible Woman Cruise in the Everywoman section, is glad she was hired on the spot by another attendee to do companywide training and later signed up two more cruise-goers as clients. "I was expecting to make contacts, but I was not expecting this response."

therapist Marjorie Barlow of Corpus Christi, Texas, urged the audience to not forget the women upon whose shoulders they were standing. She led the audience on an inner journey, asking them to close their eyes and slowly walk backward.

"Stand, and climb back into your mother," she instructed. "Now contemplate your mother's mother. Who was she? Could she vote? Think about how she described that woman, and does that describe you? What did she give you? What did she set in motion for you? What did she inherit?"

Many in the audience were moved to tears.

The inspirational words from cruise speakers resonated like an alarm clock for Angie Bryant, 32, of Nashville, Tenn., who found herself waking up early on the final morning of the cruise to put her career goals down on paper. "This has really changed my life. I have the plan now for what's next," said Bryant, office administrator for the Center for Quality and Professional Development at Belmont University, which paid for her cruise.

"It's synergy," she said. "This

connections, the networking, the sisterhood — there are so many women I can call now. I have resources."

Many of the attendees on the cruise, which cost from \$674 to \$724, were from the Atlanta area, where Wind lives. But when Danielle Turcota of Twinburg, Ohio, read a notice about the cruise in the Everywoman section, she decided to take a chance and go.

She is grateful she did. Turcota, who offers training in grooming, appropriate attire, conduct and dining and global etiquette, was hired on the spot by another attendee to do companywide training. "I have three new clients from the cruise," she marvelled. "I was expecting to make contacts, but I was not expecting this response."

No men, no vesting

Every Possible Woman participant either came solo, as Turcota did, or with a group of women, said Wind. There was not one

husband or boyfriend along for the ride.

It was a golden opportunity to make-bash, but Turcota said she was struck by the fact that she didn't hear any. "This was not an event to come and vent. I didn't hear any horror stories, women didn't tell me they were stuck in the glass ceiling. These were women who were determined to make it."

And now, four months after the cruise, stories of contacts made and new clients acquired continue to flow. My favorite comes from an Atlanta reunion party, where one cruise-goer brought along a friend who struck up a conversation with the friend of another cruise-goer. Pretty soon the two were networking as hard as anyone else in the room. A few weeks later, one had hired the other as a consultant.

So for Wind, it's full speed ahead into next year's cruise. With cosmetics magazine Faei Roberts and motivational speaker Diana Nightingale already booked as speakers, Wind promises the 1999 cruise will be bigger and better.

Wind is hopeful that attendance will be at least double: "Virtually everyone [from the 1998 cruise] said they were going to come [back] and bring someone with them," she said.