



Business Networking International's South Alabama and Northwest Florida Chapter has 850 members. Pictured third from right is franchise owner Janice Malone with a group of chapter officers.

Referral-Based Growth Works for BNI

The name BNI stands for Business Networking International. But what you probably don't know, says **Janice Malone**, executive director and Mobile franchise owner, is that BNI is about more than networking. "Our program is about coaching, training and building your business through referral-based growth," she says.

BNI Business Resource Center is the Mobile Area Chamber's Small Business of the Month.

Malone's first introduction to BNI was a book. Intrigued, when she got to the end she picked up the phone and dialed the 1-800 number to learn more. From there, she was hired to develop the area of south Alabama and the Florida panhandle, working as an independent contractor.

Two years after Malone became involved, the organization changed its business model and she bought the franchise. With three full-time employees and three contract employees, BNI Mobile has grown to 850 members in 30 different chapters.

The global organization has a presence in 44 countries and all 50 states and 138,000 members. Its mission is to help members build their business through a structured, strategic, positive and professional "word-of-mouth" program.

Here's how it works, explains Malone: Groups of 15 to 70 members form a chapter and meet weekly. Only one person representing an industry specialty is accepted into the chapter. Each member brings referrals and optimally receives referrals, often with

personal insight on what the potential client is looking for and the best way to approach him or her, avoiding cold calls.

What makes it successful? "Accountability," says Malone. Leads are tracked, particularly those that turn into business. Attendance is mandatory 52 weeks a year, although members can have substitutes take their place.

"We want farmers in BNI," she adds, further explaining that members plant the seeds for others to grow and nurture. "It's not right for everyone, but we're seeing remarkable improvement."

The benefit, she says, really lies in the training — companies often use BNI to coach and train new employees. A few of the typical professional development sessions include presentation and leadership, along with a plethora of workshops, trade

shows and conferences. Other advantages include increased exposure, building business relationships and credibility, all adding to a member's bottom line.

Recently BNI enhanced its online resources offerings so members can connect with BNI members in other chapters.

There is a fee to join, as well as an annual fee. For more information about the local BNI, visit www.BNI-Mobile.com or call 438-7050.

Go to mobilechamber.com/award.asp to submit a Small Business of the Month nomination, or contact Danette Richards at 431-8652 or drichards@mobilechamber.com.