

Business MATCHMAKING



A Cooperative Agreement between SBA and HP Small Business Foundation

Indian Sun, Inc.

Houston, TX

Many of America's successful small businesses began with a chance meeting, the discovery of a shared dream and the planting of an entrepreneurial seed that would grow into a thriving enterprise once the dream was nurtured and cultivated. Such was the case for Indian Sun, Inc., which began as a dream in Tucson and has operated as a web-based business in Houston for the past five years. The company is now thriving with both showroom and Internet sales of Native American arts, crafts and decorative pieces.

Luis Bautista, Indian Sun's marketing and business development officer, operated his own business in Tucson, home of the University of Arizona, and rented rooms to college students for extra income. By chance, Merritt L. Smith, a graduate student with high aspirations, became a tenant.

As the two got to know each other, Smith shared her dreams and ideas for a business, and Bautista freely gave marketing advice and counsel, based on his quarter-century of business experience. During their time together, Smith and Bautista began the web-based Indian Sun, Inc., buying Native American, Mexican and South American jewelry, rugs, carvings, pottery and other arts and crafts items directly from the indigenous artisans.

Bautista had been working with the U.S. Small Business Administration to gain 8(a) status as a woman- and minority-owned business in preparation for a small business loan. In the process of doing the SBA paperwork online, he discovered that a Business Matchmaking event was being planned for Houston, and thought the seminar portion of the event sounded interesting.

Business Matchmaking events are sponsored by the SBA and Hewlett-Packard, bringing government and top industry buyers together with small business sellers with goods and services to offer. Like a half-dozen other Business Matchmaking events held throughout the country earlier in the year, the December 2003 Houston event featured one-on-one appointments with government and corporate procurement officials, along with networking and educational sessions.

Reluctant Participant Becomes Active, Successful

"I wasn't really interested in making appointments at first, because I didn't feel the program would attract buyers for the kinds of products we sell," Bautista said. "I planned to go to hear the speakers—who turned out to be outstanding, by the way, and it was only after the owner, Merritt Smith, encouraged me to participate fully that I set out to schedule appointments."

With that decision made, Smith and Bautista created a PowerPoint presentation to help him use his 15 minutes in each scheduled meeting most effectively. "I felt it was a good presentation, and provided a good way to display the quality products we deal in," he said. "That freed me to talk with people, which is important because if you're going to succeed you need to go where the business is and interact with people. You can't be shy about it, and you'll find a lot of people willing to help if you just ask them."

Bautista had several appointments that he feels will lead to future business, and he's been busy since the December event making follow-up contacts. One of his appointments, though, turned out to be worth its weight in gold to someone in the jewelry business, even though it resulted in a sale of only about \$200.

"I met with Robert Gallegos, director of supplier diversity for the Houston Independent School District (HISD)," Bautista recalled. "He not only bought some jewelry but made three phone calls right then and there and introduced me to a dozen more people at the event that I feel will lead to some significant long-term sales."

Bautista estimates the \$200 sale will lead to at least \$30,000 in new business during the coming year, based on contacts he's made since Gallegos' introductions at the Business Matchmaking event. "And that's conservative," he said. "I'd be very happy with that result, but there's a good chance it could be a lot more."

HISD A Bigger Buyer Than Most Businesses Realize

From his point of view, Robert Gallegos was equally delighted to meet Bautista, who was among 157 new contacts the HISD executive made during the Business Matchmaking event.

"Few people realize that HISD is the largest school district in Texas, and the 7th largest in the United States," Gallegos explained. "And with an \$808 million construction bond we're working on, we need a remarkable variety of suppliers."

The school district's needs range from the obvious—architects, engineers and landscapers—to those less recognized, such as printers, suppliers of promotional items, playground equipment and office partitions. In between, there's a need for computers, transportation equipment and environmental studies. Gallegos' purchase from Indian Sun will be used to provide internal promotional items to district executives at HISD.

Always on the lookout for new suppliers, particularly small women- and minority-owned businesses, Gallegos now has well over 1,000 in his database.

"We're always looking for small companies to help larger contractors, and that's good for all concerned," he said. "This was beautiful. It gives us a chance to help small businesses reach out to the top people in HISD. We registered Luis and his company that same day."

Buyer and Seller Become Business Matchmaking Believers

Sharing a new business relationship together, both Bautista and Gallegos are glad they were brought together at the Business Matchmaking event.

"I would highly recommend this program for small businesses and buyers alike," Gallegos said. "I'd tell both to sign up for as many appointments as possible, and I'd especially tell the sellers not to discount lesser-known buyers such as school districts. HISD and others like us have a lot of business to offer, and we're anxious to do business with you."

Bautista echoed the sentiment.

"Go, just for the experience. You may not get new business right on the spot, but it will definitely be worth your time in the long term," he said. "Small businesses really need this kind of a boost. I think the SBA and HP should be commended for putting together this wonderful program."

Note to Media: Below is contact information to learn more about Indian Sun, Inc. and its experience with Business Matchmaking.

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