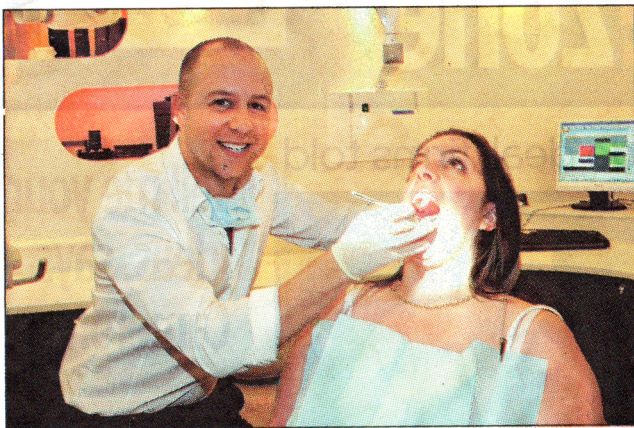


TheEnterpriseZone

Word-of-mouth referrals, female role models and

Open wide to



PICTURE: BRIAN WILLIAMSON

GOOD TO TALK: Marcos White, with patient Natalie Daykin, is a great fan of networking

SMALL firms that fail to make the most of networking could be missing out on business opportunities worth tens of thousands of pounds.

Small business owners are often reluctant to network, saying they are too busy and see little value in it. But there are some who claim it has increased revenues significantly.

The Leeds branch of

By Katie Taylor

the European group Network Central has been named Western Europe's most profitable business networking group.

Between them the 43 entrepreneur members have made business referrals worth more than £4 million over the past 12 months. Each member's average

referral potential was £93,023.

Rick Armstrong, area director for umbrella organisation Business Network International (BNI) Yorkshire West, says: 'There are different types of business networking and the key to making it work is finding the right one.'

'Events that are poorly organised or attended by people who are there simply to try

to sell are a waste of time for business owners who are looking for practical help and support.'

'The success of this particular group's ability to generate high-value business referrals for one another is due to the very high level of understanding of each others' businesses.'

'Many of the members have developed close personal friendships outside the formal networking environment. This has helped the group to achieve its success.'

Dentist Marcos White, 34, is part of the group's eclectic mix, which also includes a personal trainer who is a lay

spending on modernisation

networks

Shaolin monk, and a vehicle accident insurance fraud investigator.

Marcos says that the network has been vital in helping his practice, The Courtyard, in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire.

'I bought the practice, which offered both NHS and private dental services, in 2006, knowing nothing about business,' he says.

'I joined Network Central in 2008, as Britain was sliding into recession, and the following year my practice went private, focusing on cosmetic dentistry, and sales were shooting up.'

In five years, his turn-

over has grown by more than 50 per cent year on year, rising from £97,000 to more than £1 million.

While Marcos admits that he has invested heavily in creating a practice that attracts wealthy clients, he believes a large part of his success is a result of his networking activity.

He says: 'My website alone, which cost £12,000 and was developed by one of our members, has contributed massively to the increased sales.'

'The one-to-one mentoring sessions with people who are experts in such areas as IT, law and planning have

made me a better businessman and the close nature of the business relationship, where you have a genuine interest in helping each other's businesses, has lent itself to a high number of referrals.'

According to BNI's national office, Network Central Leeds is on track to reach £5 million worth of business referrals by September.

The Government last week launched the website mentorsme.co.uk, through which small business owners will have access to a network of 10,000 mentors, who will be able to provide business support and advice.