



Right: it is 7am and members of BRX are tucking into breakfast.

Above: the business meeting gets underway.

The big breakfast



Business networking groups are springing up all over the Midlands. **Fiona Langton** finds out why they are so popular

It's 7am on a miserable winter morning. It's freezing cold. It's not yet daylight. Yet people are already starting to converge on a hotel in Sutton Coldfield.

They are here for a business meeting with a difference. Members of the Birmingham North group of Business Referral Exchange (BRX), they meet here every week to network, to pass on business contacts and generally support and encourage each other

in the harsh world of running your own business.

They start by eating a hearty breakfast, and over the bacon and eggs and cups of coffee, they told me why the group works for them. "Things have been a lot easier for me since joining," said Sian Pemberton, community fundraiser for the Norman Laud Association.

"I have so many contacts now and I don't

have to go in cold because the group gives you an introduction to people you wouldn't normally meet. Only recently I got in contact with a guy who owns a wine company. He did a tasting for us, which was a great success. I would never have got that contact without BRX."

The dozen members of the group each come from a different trade or profession, to avoid any conflict of interest. Current

members include an accountant, a graphic designer, a life coach, a photographer, a business development specialist, a computer networking specialist, an independent financial adviser and a marketing specialist.

"That's quite a useful bunch of people to have on hand to give advice and support for any up and coming business person," said life coach Clare Whalley. "Like me, a lot of

'We all have connections with around one thousand people each'

people who set up their own business have been used to working in the corporate world. Suddenly sitting on your own in an office can be very isolating. But here you have your own support group for motivation and morale, they give you contacts and you get to know people and their work ethics before recommending them to others."

After finishing their breakfasts, the group moved to another room for their meeting, which gave feedback on a recent training day which had been held, as well as a report on a recent meal out for the group and planning for future events.

Everyone in the group then got a chance to give a sixty-



All the members appreciate the friendly and sociable nature of the group.

second presentation on any aspect of their current business which they needed help or advice with.

Stewart Evans, who set up the group three years ago, singled out various members of the group to help them with focusing on business strategies.

Then, each member of the group in turn gave out slips of paper on which they had written contacts who might be able to help people with the business problems they had outlined before. More than anything, the friendly and supportive nature of the group came across.

Stewart says that fifty per cent of the people who apply to BRX are rejected.

"This way, the quality of the business is so much higher. One really good referral a month can be worth thousands of pounds to a business," he said.

There are around two hundred branches of BRX all over the Midlands. There is an initial joining fee of £495, then a fee for each meeting of approximately £8. The members think it is money well spent, however.

"We all know or have connections with around one thousand people each," said Clare, "so it is well worth it in terms of the business you get back. And I've made such good friends here too."

• For enquiries about BRX, email: pam@mimcreative.co.uk or visit: www.braxnet.co.uk