

PEER GROUPS

A Mastermind Concept That Works

As Ener Systems has discovered, learning from your peers is better than learning from your own mistakes.

By Michele Miller • Photography by Tim Mueller

ENER SYSTEMS, named for my husband and partner, Rene (spelled backward), is in Covington, La., 30 miles north of New Orleans. Someone from our company is in the city every day. We now have six direct employees and about \$650,000 in annual revenue.

I am a firm believer in peer groups. I started in Robin Robins' Producer's Club in late 2008, joined the Operations SuperStars in 2010, and got into Gary Pica's Winner's Circle in January 2011. Tigerpaw Software invited me to be in its Customer Advisory Group about a year ago.

So when I speak with other IT providers at industry conferences, I always suggest they take a look at groups like the ones run by Robin Robins and Gary Pica, and even the vendor advisory groups. One big benefit is that other IT providers share how they failed in certain business areas, so everyone learns not to do the same thing.

When I first started going to these groups, Rene asked me what my goal was, and I told him it was simple: learn as much as I could. After only a few months we both saw the value. For example, we got so much information at the Robin Robins groups that we realized we also needed information about sales. So off we went to Gary Pica and set up an accountability group that focused on the sales process.

Now there are about 50 peers in the main Operations SuperStars group, and we meet as needed or once a month. I also meet with a couple of subgroups, with eight to 10 peers, every week. On those calls, people promise to accomplish X. On the next call, they are asked if they did X or not, and they have to say. Embarrassment pushes everyone to fol-

low up on their promises to the group. People also ask for help on specific issues.

One area I had struggled with was technician time tracking and billing, so I discussed it with the Operations group to get my ideas together. With their feedback, I approached Tigerpaw with ways to upgrade their software's time-tracking processes, and they did. This interaction prompted the company to ask that I participate in their Customer Advisory Group, which meets as needed

when they have some news to share.

Some projects the Operations group tackles are small, and some are large. For example, we're now working on ways to improve the onboarding process for new clients, for which we're creating 103 documents. Nobody likes homework, but we have to do it. Each week someone gets an assignment to create a new document, and the next week we all go through it, discuss it, and make revisions. If I had to create all 103 documents myself, it would never happen. That's why this mastermind concept works.

We also help one another more directly. If I have a client with a branch office in California, for example, and I know a peer group member out there, I'll call that person for hands-on help with the customer. The person agrees because we've helped him with other things—it's give and take. And because we have developed close relationships, no one has to worry about a group member stealing a customer.

The Robin Robins and Gary Pica programs are about \$900 each per month. After seeing how much value we get from working with our peers in the groups, we haven't had to work to justify these investments at all.

Another thing I've noticed from the peer meetings is that IT providers in other countries may have different accents, but they have the same issues we do in Louisiana. There are legal differences in Australia and England, of course, just like there are between states here in the United States. But their views on business are not so different from our own. And, like us, they agree that we come out ahead when we learn from our peers.

Profile: Michele Miller President, Ener Systems

Established: 1997; started pushing growth in 2007

Employees: six, with expected revenues of about \$650,000 in 2011

Website: www.enersystems.com

Company focus: MSP to businesses with 10 to 100 computers. We are the IT department you always wanted, but never thought you could afford ... until now.

Favorite part of my job: I get to work with my husband, Rene.

Least favorite part: Work takes time away from our four children.

What people would be surprised to know about me: I rode and taught Hunter/Jumper horses while majoring in mechanical engineering at the University of New Orleans. The title on my business card is Undercover Equestrian Champion. I still enjoy riding, but now the jumps are not as high.