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## Group offers women a fresh take on networking

By [Faye Trafford](#)

Women looking to build professional relationships have a new option in networking. The members of Fresh Connections say they build more than contact lists and a library of business cards; they make lifelong friends.

For women looking for the intimacy of a book club with the benefits of business outreach, this group might just be your cup of tea.

Grace recently sat down with the organization's executive board to talk about the rapidly expanding network – seven chapters have cropped up in Connecticut and Rhode Island during the last year and a half. Founding president Lorraine Sanborn said the organization prides itself on its opportunities for personal networking, and fostering close relationships among members. Each group is limited to 25 women; and each member represents a different profession.

The small number means there are ample opportunities for one-to-one connections including mentoring.

"[Mentoring] really took off on us, especially with young women looking to get their feet wet," said Kathy Kane, founder and board vice president, and commercial account manager for Bouvier Insurance in Uncasville. "And you look around the room and you see these women coming out of their shells, you see their businesses taking off..."

"It's beyond a business group, without a doubt," added Mary Lou Lamontagne, founder and treasurer, and

business development officer at NewportFed. "Our members build amazing friendships. We love to get together on a social basis."

"The fact that it's taken on such a life of its own shows there was a need for it in the marketplace," she said.

The organization is dedicated to remaining small and accessible. They meet at free locations, to keep the cost of membership down. Members said Fresh Connections also seems to be attracting women who are working in male-dominated professions and want to make more friends in their field.

"Business groups can be male-heavy," said Anne-Marie Foster, geriatric care manager at the law office of Richard D. Dixon in Mystic. "We're much more intimate. Personalities and philosophies become evident" in small groups.

Board members also said the group also fills a need for community among women who work from home.

"The way society is changing, some people work in their houses all day," Foster said. "The Internet allows for disconnect."

Some of the group's aspects will feel familiar to anyone who has participated in other networking

### For more information

Fresh Connections groups currently meet in Griswold, Mystic, Norwich, and Old Saybrook in Connecticut, and Wakefield, Westerly and Warwick in Rhode Island. For more information visit [www.freshconnectionsforwomen.org](http://www.freshconnectionsforwomen.org).

organizations — the "elevator" or "escalator" speech, for example, in which a member delivers an effective, memorable message about her business in 30-60 seconds. But Fresh Connections helps members hone their approach via "freshstorming," which Foster calls "a SWAT team analysis" of a member's business and delivery. Ideas are brainstormed and written onto a large tearsheet that the member takes home. Freshstorming is intense, but optional, and Foster said women who opt for it are grateful for the experience. "You leave with this big sheet of ideas, and an understanding of how you are being perceived," she said.

Chapters meet biweekly, and each has its own governing officers.

"Each chapter has its own personality," Sanborn said. The Old Saybrook chapter, for example, started a student group and business mentoring program at Old Saybrook High School. The student meetings follow the Fresh Connections format, and each young woman is paired with a member.

In this way, the organization is reaching out to the next generation of businesswomen.

"The need is everywhere," Sanborn said.

One of the more compelling stories to grow out of a friendship born at the Mystic chapter is the nonprofit organization Tipping a Nation, a cultural and leadership exchange program founded in part by Lamontagne and fellow member Barbara LaChance.

Tipping A Nation tries to improve social and economic conditions in developing East African nations by serving as an educational and inspirational resource for local leaders and "developing customized solutions for each country," according to the organization's mission statement.

After a lifelong career in the banking industry, Lamontagne says overseas humanitarian work was never on her "radar."

"It's starting to feel like it's this big shift in my life. It's starting to change where my future is going," she said.

"I definitely feel like it's destiny."

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