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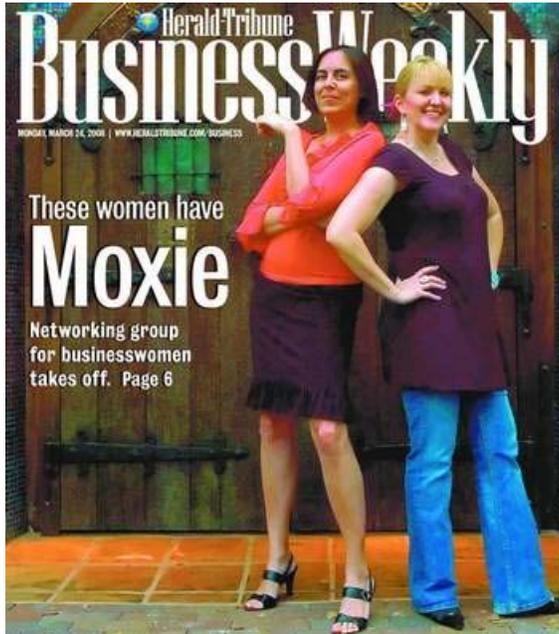
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### Women with Moxie mix business and pleasure



**SARASOTA** It was slightly less than a year ago when Elsie Gilmore found

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herself craving interaction with other businesswomen like herself, but could find no outlet geared specifically toward her and her peers.

Gilmore, owner of the Sarasota Web design firm True Green Studios, called a friend and business owner, Laura Daniel Gale, and brain-stormed.

How could they form a group of like-minded businesswomen to come together each month to swap war stories, successes and build bridges that could benefit everyone involved?

They wanted to attract women with verve. Women with drive. Women with pep.

Gilmore and Gale began to spread the word throughout town about their new networking group for female business owners, artists and sales people with a name based on the type of person they were trying to attract: "Women with Moxie."

In August, the duo hosted the first Moxie meeting at Metro Coffee & Wine not exactly sure what to expect. Businesswomen filed in -- and kept showing up until there were more than 50 at the Osprey Avenue café, talking, sharing, and getting to know one another.

"That was pretty great seeing all those people there," Gilmore said. "It made me know this was needed."

In December the ever-growing group branched out and helped gather food for the Mayor's Feed the Hungry campaign. In January, the ever-larger group outgrew the Metro and found a new home in a larger room at the Rustic Grill on Lemon Avenue.

"We just thought that spending time with everyone and bouncing ideas around would be beneficial," Gilmore said. "And it was. I know that there are great connections being made."

There are no dues to pay to join Women with Moxie. It is as simple as signing up at the group's Web site, [www.womenwithmoxie.com](http://www.womenwithmoxie.com), and uploading a photo and profile. Various members donate their services to be given away at the meetings as prizes.

Gilmore talks as little as possible at the free-form mixers -- February's was called the "Love Mixer" -- letting the businesswomen forge their own friendships and partnerships as the night progressed.

The fact the the Rustic Grill invented a special "Moxie Cosmo" probably often helps the conversations along.

"I don't want any boundaries on it," Gilmore said. "It's not about high-powered networking, it's about forming relationships. You just put these people in the room and see what happens, and it's usually great.

In March, Women with Moxie welcomed its 300th member. And the group is still growing.

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### **Laura Daniel Gale**

Co-founder Gale said her group mixes the best of the special social interaction between females with the business of running a business.

"I think a lot of us get overwhelmed with our ridiculous schedules and the expectations we put on ourselves," Gale said. "This is a place to unwind and have a social night. The networking just happens naturally."

Gale, who owns a boutique and gallery in Sarasota's Rosemary District called Everything But the Girl, said she has met dozens of businesswomen that she otherwise would never have gotten to know.

Between gatherings, Gale and others in the group rely on its Web site, which is updated daily, for news on new members or group business.

"The Web site creates a bridge between the mixers," she said. "I literally go to it once a day to see what's new, who's joined. That Web site is a really cool connection."

In addition to swapping ideas, planning collaborations, or simply chatting about the day's events, members of the group also help build one another's businesses, Gale said.

"As a Moxie member I am always going to use a Moxie member to fill the needs I have."

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### **Dill Ward**

Dill Ward says Women with Moxie equates to a chamber of commerce for females.

"It's a unique opportunity to connect with other businesswomen in the entrepreneurial spirit," Ward said. "It's a great organization."

Ward runs a community group that brings together people for an introduction into eating vegetarian meals for dinner, and has found the various Moxie members' businesses to be great places to post her fliers about upcoming gatherings.

The mixers have become invaluable to her in terms of meeting like-minded women.

"Sarasota is still is a fairly small town," she said. "And everyone has to support each other during this economic downturn and strengthen the community and keep re-inspiring the entrepreneurial spirit."

The lack of men at the mixers -- she said there are always a few at the door peeking in and wondering what is going on -- levels the playing field.

"Everyone has the same opportunities," Ward said. "There's not the sexual tension, and it creates a more feminine type of opportunity.

"Sorry," she said. "No boys."

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### **Leah Vartanian**

From the inception of Women with Moxie, Leah Vartanian has been a member.

The co-owner of Raw Raw Foods, a downtown vegan lunch delivery service, says the lack of men at the gatherings makes a huge difference in the tone.

"Without men around, women are different," she said. "If you have a guy around, things just change."

Typical male-isms like one-upmanship, competition and rivalry are simply not present, members say.

For example, at a recent mixer Vartanian ran into a woman who runs a business similar to hers and they chatted the night away as new friends rather than old competitors.

"It becomes comfortable talking with your competition, and that's quite unique," she said. "We weren't trying to one-up each other. I like that."

An admitted flirt, Vartanian said that with no men in sight, she and other members can stick to talking about business.

"There is a sense of togetherness," she said. "It's not competitive, and it's not anything but supportive. I've never been to any group like this."

As with other Moxie members, she buys the supplies she needs from members of the group whenever possible, and some Moxie members have taken to ordering lunch from her on a regular basis.

"I joined the very first nanosecond it started," Vartanian said. "It's pretty remarkable that it has over 300 members already."

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### **Stephanie Caland, Christina Donahue**

Stephanie Caland co-owns The Body Connection with Christina Donahue, and both attend Women with Moxie mixers.

"It's been unbelievable," Caland said. "The ambiance at the mixers is not that staid thing that other mixers have. It's not like you are 13 years old waiting against the wall for someone to ask you to dance: It's a perfect balance of being a relaxed environment yet the women are there for a reason."

Caland says the energy at every event gets better and better as each mixer gets bigger and bigger. No men, Caland said, brings with it an interesting vibe.

"I think every single member of the Women with Moxie would say they love men, but it's women talking to women like girlfriends," she said. "It does add a very interesting dynamic that there are just women there."

The pair's business has jumped 30 percent since the beginning of the year, an increase Caland attributes to Moxie members coming to sample her massage and alternative therapies after they have learned they are available at a mixer.

"It's a friendly thing, even though people are there in a professional capacity," Caland said. "It's enabled us to get together with other businesses -- some widely different than our one -- and complement each other and find ways to fit together."

Caland also finds the Women with Moxie Web site as a place to rustle up some new business.

"It's not only people we meet at the mixer, but the Web site has been a wonderful tool where we can post specials and get new clients in the door."

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