

Cassidy: Small business has its day

THEY MAY BE LITTLE, BUT THEY'RE A BIG ECONOMIC FORCE

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Here in the land of the Googleplex and the Oracle towers and Intel looming on Highway 101, it's sometimes hard to remember who's minding the store. Literally.

Or who's selling the designer coffee to keep the engineering team going. Or the industrial washing systems to clean messy equipment or the aerial photography for that perfect annual report cover.

Small businesses, being small, are easy to overlook. But they are a big economic force, employing about half the private workforce and creating the overwhelming majority of new jobs.

I was reminded of that the other day at the San Jose Doubletree as I was trampled by hundreds of small-business owners who had come to meet hundreds of buyers from huge government agencies and big private companies. The scrum was officially called the Business Matchmaking Western Regional, and it was a scene.

"This is my first one," said Kathleen Rogers, a purchasing agent from the University of California-Santa Cruz. "I imagine this is what speed dating must be like."

It is, but with less wine and kissing.

Picture a hotel ballroom with buyers like Rogers sitting at 90 small tables. Then picture sellers like Don Stoneham, of Agape Enterprises of Dublin, sitting across from them. He's got 15 minutes to make his pitch and an impression.

"You have to do your homework," said Stoneham, a business management consultant. "Then during your presentation you want to make sure you're very enthusiastic, very contagious.

The events are staged around the country by Business Matchmaking, a non-profit that relies on help from SCORE, a volunteer organization inspired by the Small Business Administration and sponsorships from corporations including Hewlett-Packard, Sprint and Federal Express.

The idea is to help small businesses prosper, sure. But the idea also is to introduce small business to government agencies and big businesses - both of which have diversity goals in contracting with small businesses including those owned by women, minorities and disabled veterans.

Oh, and big companies are willing to play host to the matchmaking events for one other reason: Small businesses sell things, but they also buy things - things like computers and printers and printer cartridges.

"Because it attracts so many small businesses, it's a great opportunity to tell them about what we offer," said Lisa Baker, an HP marketing director.

No one expects final sales to be made at a matchmaking event. It's meant to open doors, start a conversation. But plenty remains at stake in the quickie meetings.

The day struck me as a study in the heroic.

No doubt there were well-established businesses, even some on the biggish side. (The feds generally define a small business as one with fewer than 500 employees.) But others were one- or two-person companies, waiting to meet with Homeland Security or the Stanford Linear Accelerator or Genentech or American Airlines or the State Department.

It's a lonely existence, running a small business. No one is going to sell your vision but you. If things go wrong, that's on you. Good or bad, it was your idea.

But those flitting from table to table in the big ballroom carrying all that weight is precisely the point.

Joice Walton said goodbye to 20 years as a buyer for valley tech companies to start a coffee company.

"Parts is parts after a while," Walton said.

Now the San Jose woman studies beans and blends as president and employee No. 1-and-only of Brown Eyed Girl Coffee Co.

"It's not for the faint of heart," she said of being her own boss. But the freedom is almost indescribable.

"If you can make it happen for yourself," she said, "why not?"

Sure. Why not?