

# How to Build a Home Business Support Group

Kerry Hannon (McGraw Hill Connect, Yahoo Finance, New York Times)

**KEYWORDS:** Entrepreneurship, Retirement.

*This article is part of America's Entrepreneurs, a Next Avenue initiative made possible by the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation and EIX, Entrepreneur and Innovation Exchange.*

Running a home business can be lonely, especially during the pandemic. But creating a support group of other entrepreneurs working at home can be the solution — and it could boost your profits.

Just ask Russ Eanes, 63, who founded the editing and self-publishing business Walker Press three years ago and runs it from his home office in Harrisonburg, Va. He gets camaraderie and suggestions by tapping into a group of five other business owners.

"For nearly two years, my group has been meeting [virtually] once per week," says Eanes. "We learn from each other's successes and failures. It helps that I don't feel it's just 'me, myself' out there."

## How a Home Business Support Group Can Help You

One key to the successful group dynamics: "We are involved in different types of work, so there is a cross-fertilization of ideas," Eanes says.

Building a home-based business support group can be a lifeline for solo entrepreneurs, especially those facing challenges when starting out.

"I think it is a unique concept that can certainly serve as emotional support for struggling entrepreneurs," says Donna M. De Carolis, dean of the Charles D. Close School of Entrepreneurship at Drexel University and a member of the editorial board of EIX, the Entrepreneurial and Innovation Exchange, funded by the Schulze Family Foundation. "The idea of a diverse brain trust group to flesh out ideas and challenges is a good one." (Full disclosure: that foundation is a Next Avenue funder.)

The pandemic, interestingly, makes setting up and holding support group meetings easier. It's less hassle

than trying to get everyone together in person.

### 1. Look for founders at a comparable stage of business growth

"The key is to have some commonality among the members," says Marc Miller, founder of CareerPivot.com and a Next Avenue Influencer in Aging. "In my group in the Career Pivot Community, everyone is early in their journey and is building largely a solopreneur business. They can help one another stay out of their heads, and, more importantly, be cheerleaders for one another."

Outside input "keeps you grounded," Miller notes. "When you get discouraged, you may need someone outside of your sphere to pick you up."

And the group members could become collaborators. "I have a number of people in my group who have partnered up to either work on projects together, or used each other as a resource," Miller says.

"When you get discouraged, you may need someone outside of your sphere to pick you up."

### 2. Keep the circle small

"The goal is to bring together around five to ten entrepreneurs on a regular basis—once a week or once a month," says Fran Hauser, a New York City area-based startup investor and advisor and author of "The Myth of the Nice Girl: Achieving a Career You Love Without Becoming a Person You Hate."

Hauser went virtual with her group this spring. Prior to the pandemic, her support group met in coffee shops and co-working spaces, rotating the host in charge of leading each session.

"It's easier than ever now to run a virtual meeting for an hour over Google Meet or Zoom, which allows you to invite entrepreneurs who don't live in your town to join," she says. "If it's a local group, you could opt for socially distancing outside."



### 3. Create a diverse ensemble

When choosing members of your support group, it helps to seek out diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and personality types. This will bring other layers of viewpoints and spark discussion.

To find members, tap into your LinkedIn connections, Facebook friends, your alma mater alumni group, and even your local Chamber of Commerce.

But Miller adds a caveat: "It is valuable to have slightly different skill sets and experiences, but you also need chemistry between the members." You'll be the best judge of that when you form the group. And if you later find that some members don't click, you can politely ask one or more to drop out.

"I was asked to be part of a group a few years back. I went for about a month and found there was not a commitment from others to show up. And more importantly, I did not like several of the members personally," says Miller. "They were either too judgmental or critical of others. That was not the kind of environment I wanted to be around."

"There are three of us meeting on Zoom weekly and it is going really well."

These days, he says, "there are three of us meeting on Zoom weekly and it is going really well."

### 4. Make sure everyone is committed - Consistency is important

"I like to meet weekly because I need someone to hold me accountable," Miller says. Anything over a week in between meetings — it becomes difficult to do that."

A regular check-in can be crucial for your mental health as well as business advice, particularly when your enterprise is new.

"In the initial stages of entrepreneurship, it's imperative because that's a period full of unknowns, self-doubt and in many unfortunate cases, loneliness," Nathalie Molina Niño, author of "Leapfrog: The New Revolution for Women Entrepreneurs" and chief executive of O<sup>3</sup>, a privately held investment company, told me.

I interviewed her for my book "Never Too Old To Get Rich: The Entrepreneur's Guide to Starting a Business Mid-Life." (Full disclosure: Next Avenue is the co-

publisher, with Wiley, because I'm a regular blogger on entrepreneurship for the site.)

But, Molina Niño says, a home business support group is about more than networking. "It's connecting," she notes.

### 5. Write down agenda for the meetings.

Setting specific goals for them can be helpful. They'll keep the sessions on track and focused.

In Hauser's group, she says, "the members each share something they're working on or struggling with, and the other members respond with thoughts."

Some home business support groups ask members to set a small goal to work on between meetings and then report back on their progress.

That said, "one factor to consider, especially during these times of rapid change and uncertainty, would be the available bandwidth that entrepreneurs can devote to creating and implementing this type of planning," says De Carolia. "That's because especially right now, these groups might lose or alienate members who are not keeping up with the goal."

Eanes is looking forward to taking his home business support group to the next level. He's looking to get "more involved in a group of independent, small publishers, and do some types of regular meetings with them. In that case, we would be able to provide more industry-specific ideas for each other.