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ONE DOLLAR

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Where the Elite Meet and Really Mean Business

By WARREN STRUGATCH

ONE evening last month, Jim McCann, chairman of 1-800-Flowers, stood near the cold seafood appetizers in a private room in Hofstra University's library, reachable only by private elevator. He greeted about 100 invited guests who nibbled on shrimp and two types of caviar before heading into the adjacent dining room.

Mr McCann, it turns out, is more of a bon vivant than is evident from his many television appearances as spokesman for his Westbury-based company. At once oracular and avuncular, he visibly enjoyed his role as host of what he described more than once as an intimate gathering. Without notes, he chatted about the digitalization of commerce, part of a trend he called the Next Economy. He theorized about its still unknown effects on retaining. Then he introduced a series of academics from Hofstra, where he serves on the Board of Trustees, before welcoming several partners from Ernst & Young, his longtime advisors.

As guests prepared to tuck into dinner, Mr. McCann sang the praises of a young wine merchant from Manhattan, before introducing the young retailer to the podium. Mr. McCann beamed as the young man, Josh Weston, delivered a slightly edgy tribute to wine and the good life.

The occasion was a rehearsal for four similar gatherings to be held at locations throughout the country; the first will be Carlsbad, Calif., next week. Another will be held on Long Island this fall. While the topics remain undetermined, the format — genial gatherings of people Mr. McCann describes as “thought leaders and marketing geniuses” — will be retained.

However, the programs will be limited to about 20 people, and will be restricted to executives, he said.

“The list is confidential, but I can tell you they include the chairman and C.E.O.’s and presidents of major companies,” Mr. McCann said.

To get confirmation from such a high-powered list, he said, required assuring them that the meeting would be intellectually productive.

“These are all people who have serious constraints on their time,” he said. “To get them all together, you have to be



Exclusive, intimate dining conferences for business leaders are gaining popularity. Patrick Smalley, above, managing director of the Garden City Hotel, a site for such dinners.

able to give them access to truly innovative thinking from across the business spectrum.”

In recent years, such gatherings of so-called “thought leaders” have become a feature of the business landscape, often expanded to include A-list politicians. Perhaps the granddaddy of them is the Renaissance Weekend event held every year in Hilton Head, S.C. In addition to attracting business leaders and academic innovators, the gathering also brought in an ambitious young governor, Bill Clinton, who expanded his contacts enormously — and used those contacts as he prepared to run for President.

Held in upscale hotels, resorts, and fine restaurants temporarily closed to the public, such elite gatherings characteristically address ambitious topics in luxurious settings. For business leaders the meetings offer the opportunity to learn first-hand how their peers are handling similar problems not only in their own industry, but in others.

Long Island has lagged behind this trend. While there is no shortage of business gatherings here, few attract participants from outside the region. Few of them attract even the senior executives of local companies. Executives beg off most

conferences with complaints that they are variations of Pay to Play: if you're willing to pay the lunch tab, the group will be happy to listen to you as the expert on your choice of topics. Many meetings are little more than marketing opportunities, with little discussion of trends or new technology, or anything not involved in selling a product or service.

There are signs that's changing.

This summer, an invitation-only series of business dinners was launched by the Garden City Hotel in partnership with the *Long Island Business News*, the Ronkonkoma-based weekly. Called the Executive Roundtable, the forum meets monthly in the masculine confines of the hotel's Grill Room, where the publisher and editor, John L. Kominicki, keeps discussion candid and focused. Each month the Roundtable takes on a new industry, and with it a new guest list.

Part of the appeal of these invitation-only forums is that they bring together people who know each other by reputation, but have never met face to face.

“These are all senior people, each a leader in their industry, yet remarkably in many cases they have never met,” said the Garden City Hotel's executive vice president and general manager, Patrick

Smalley, who helps plan the meetings and also participates. Mr. Smalley said the meetings attract executives who are turned off by what he called the “insular” nature of many Long Island business function — the same people offering familiar ideas.

“One of our purposes is to allow people to be more candid,” he said. “We make it point to let them know the meetings are confidential.”

Mr. Kominicki has found that the forums allow him to meet influential executives and establish relationships with them. “I'm still a relative newcomer here,” said the publisher, who arrived from a similar post in Oklahoma City in June 1988. “The meetings are a great opportunity for me to meet the players and the issues facing the Long Island market.”

Executives make time for the programs, he said, in part because it's “a big treat to be there as our guest and explore trends and issues in depth, detail and historical perspective. The debates have been very lively, especially about the future of high tech and commercial development. I find myself scribbling notes on cocktail napkins until the wee hours.”

While reporters are not allowed to listen in, they do have access to the guest list, and may follow up afterward, Mr. Kominicki said. “It has been a decided plus for our editorial coverage, and we may have sold an ad or two, although that's not really what it's about.

The dinners are scheduled to end at 9 p.m. Usually about half the group stays on and continues chatting, he said. Although a bar is open, “everyone drinks tea,” Mr. Smalley explained with a smile.

David Levitan, senior director of Cushman & Wakefield, a commercial real estate company with a regional office in Jericho, attended last month's real estate program expecting little in the way of intellectual stimulation, and found himself pleasantly surprised.

“I usually don't get involved in such forums, because I find very little accomplished,” he said. “But I'll come if I feel ideas will be raised and discussed.”

Mr. Kominicki kept the discussion spirited and informative, Mr. Levitan said. “I was impressed. It was a wonderful evening. It was like a group of people who got together for dinner at someone's house and just started talking about the issues they care about.” ■