



# **Forum of Executive Women 2011 Focus Group Report**

**New Members – 5/18/2011  
Existing/General Members – 5/19/2011  
Founding/Seasoned Members – 5/26/2011  
Past Members – online survey**

August 2011

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## Overview

Over the past several years, Forum of Executive Women (FEW) has seen a decline in membership from where it was a decade ago. There may be many reasons behind the decline, including the economy and increasing number of competing organizations. However, local professional organization participation continues to be a viable part of the St. Cloud area business community. Professionals desire to be a part of an expanded peer network in order to grow their business and develop/enhance personal and professional skills. FEW's offerings are still valuable and relevant, and FEW wants professional women to choose its group first when deciding which ones to join. As an organization, FEW has a track record of being flexible to the changing needs of professionals in effort to keep membership strong.

## Project Objectives

The overall purpose of this project was to uncover information that will help FEW and its Board gain an intimate understanding of why members join and stay with the organization. Another part of that is determining what the organization can deliver to members in order for them to gain the most value out of their membership.

Focus group information will be used in Board planning, programming, marketing and communications to retain and grow membership.

## Research Method

In May 2011, the FEW Marketing Committee conducted three (3) live focus groups with current and founding FEW members and one online survey with past FEW members. Participants agreed to contribute in the focus groups in return for

three guest passes that allow free admittance for them (past members) and/or guests of their choice at future meeting(s).

## 2011 Participants

The four groups consisted of:

- New Members (< one year)
- General Members (1-10 years)
- Seasoned/Founding Members (members 10+ years)
- Past Members

The Marketing Committee recruited volunteer participants from our current and founding member base for the new, general and seasoned member groups. Recruiting resulted in six (6) members participating in the new member group, five (5) in the general member group and seven (7) in the seasoned member group. Five former FEW members responded to the online survey for past members. These participants closely paralleled the demographic profile of professional women in the St. Cloud area.

This report summarizes the findings from the May 2011 focus groups and online survey, including quotes that aid in understanding members' perceptions of and experiences with FEW and their ideas for recruiting and increasing membership value.

## About Focus Groups

Focus group research is qualitative research that offers a sampling of opinions that may not fully represent the views of the study population. Questions are open-ended to encourage dialogue and to uncover underlying attitudes and beliefs. These findings shed some insight into how FEW can continue to attract and improve its value to members. They may not represent the views of all FEW members. The FEW Board should continue to stay close to the pulse of its members in order to ensure their

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changing needs are being met.

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## Findings

### Why Members are Members

*All groups were led through questioning delving into why they joined FEW or why they continue to renew their membership each year.*

Reasons for joining/staying were fairly common across groups:

- To grow their professional network
- To be involved in the community as a job/company requirement
- To get to know other professional women who share similar challenges and opportunities
- To have a low-pressure venue where it is possible to simply show up and enjoy a monthly lunch and program with peers

#### Key Messages:

1. There is a business need for involvement.
2. As an organization of professional women, FEW offers unique opportunities.
3. FEW is attractive to many busy women because it is one of only a few organizations that do not require a large commitment of time or resources.

### New Members: Why They Joined

*The new members were asked about how they found out about FEW. Responses centered on a few common themes.*

They learned about FEW from a variety of sources, including:

- Connections in their professional network

- Other people in their company who are current or past members and have told them about it

- Invitation by their peers

#### Key Messages:

1. Word of mouth is the most effective form of recruitment.
2. FEW is viewed largely in a positive light in the community.

### Quotes

*"I needed an organization with people who understand the unique challenges of working women."*

*"Women have a tendency to want to help other women. There is no other organization that surrounds you with other like-minded women whose mission is to help you succeed."*

*"This is the one group where I can just show up and enjoy a meeting without being guilted into selling things or recruiting. When I finally reached a point in my life where I could be more involved in FEW, the group was even more welcoming."*

### New Members: First Impressions

*The new members were asked about their first impressions. They also were asked to share what their best experience has been with FEW thus far.*

Participants brought an energy and excitement about their involvement with FEW unlike any other group. They were passionate about FEW, introducing a concept of "sisterhood" into the conversation. First impressions were overwhelmingly positive. Things noted in particular were:

- Thoroughness and follow-up in the membership process
- Welcome phone call and guest follow-up mentioned many times
- The quality and consistency in FEW's communications overall (i.e. website, newsletter, e-blasts)
- A friendlier and more welcoming feel than expected
- Flexibility to fit every member, meaning each woman can make it whatever she wants it to be (this was a common comment in all groups)

### **Key Messages:**

1. Feeling welcome is critically important to new members. FEW is meeting, and in some cases, exceeding expectations. Consistent and personal follow-up by the Membership Committee is extremely effective and should continue.
2. Consistent communication is valued.
3. FEW needs to continue to focus on finding personal ways to connect with and communicate with new members at and outside of meetings.
4. Each person seems to have her own version of what FEW is to her. The theme of a "My FEW" marketing idea emerged.

Participants also noted some things that surprised them about FEW when they joined. Some felt the meetings were larger than they expected. Some felt group demographics were younger than they expected.

All participant groups expressed mixed feelings about the changing demographics of the organization. They value "new blood," yet they feel they can truly benefit from the knowledge, experience and connections brought by more seasoned members. The word "balance" was brought up in each focus group.

## **How FEW Stacks Up**

*Each focus group was asked what other professional organizations they are involved in. Also, they were asked how FEW is similar/different than those organizations.*

Participants across all groups have been involved in other organizations over the years. The Chamber was mentioned most often. The biggest difference between FEW and other groups (and participants agreed unanimously) lies in the makeup of our membership and the overall tone/feel of our meetings. One of the main differences from other groups is the lack of extracurricular commitments, such as fund raisers, committee work, attendance minimums, etc.

All those in the focus groups indicated that FEW meetings are comfortable because members generally do not use the meetings as an opportunity to make sales pitches.

Participants mentioned singling out FEW because of its membership being exclusively professional women. Meetings are a chance to make connections, both personal and professional, without the meeting "feeling" like a stuffy networking event. Networking is a key reason for joining, but for the most part, participants do not feel pressured or awkward when interacting with other FEW members. These are women who share much in common and participants indicated that a lack of things to talk about is rarely an issue. At FEW meetings, the feedback was that networking comes naturally and the welcoming nature of the group makes it happen easily and painlessly.

Beyond the camaraderie and high level of peer networking, participants expressed great pride in the quality of programs FEW provides.

### **Key Messages:**

1. The quality and variety of programming is well received.
2. The tone of the group is more comfortable than other groups – there are no sales pitches and no extracurricular requirements.
3. The Board has made significant strides in adapting to changing technologies, member needs and communications, but still has room to improve.

Most participants did not realize the Program Committee seeks speakers in three genres of development: 1/3 civic, 1/3 professional and 1/3 personal growth.

Some also expressed uncertainty of the meeting time and when to arrive in order to ensure time for socializing. There also was some confusion about how guest passes work. Although all of this information is on the FEW website, it is clear that FEW needs to educate members about it more frequently.

## Quotes

*“FEW does not compete with the Chamber and Rotary. It has a tone and a feeling of belonging all its own. FEW’s unique qualities put it in a class by itself.”*

*“There are other groups to join if you’re looking for service opportunities or sales leads. FEW is where I go for myself – to broaden my horizons and enrich my network of go-to people.”*

*“FEW is different because it is focused on self development more than business development.”*

## Meeting Format / Opportunities to Explore

*The focus groups were asked how they feel about the format of FEW’s monthly meetings, including what works and what does not. They also were asked what other things outside of monthly meetings FEW could offer that would be of value to them.*

Frequency of the structured monthly meetings was stated to be “just right” for all of the groups, as were the timeframe or length.

Meeting content is generally well received. It was mentioned that the Programming Committee should keep its focus on speakers who bring useful insights that can be relevant to the audience right away. One person mentioned she gauges the effectiveness of the speaker by whether she can use what she has learned that same day.

This was the consensus in the general members and new member groups. There was some discussion about the balance of networking opportunities and program speakers. The seasoned member group appeared more invested in a continuing primary focus on monthly speakers versus networking. This could be due to the historical focus that has always been placed on the programs and the original mission of the founding members, which included a much stronger focus on speakers.

All participants felt FEW needs to be more focused on providing more opportunities to connect with other members. The new member group suggested additional gatherings outside of the monthly meetings, while the general members suggested more networking time/activities be integrated into existing monthly meetings. Members are largely aware of Fireside with FEW, but commented that other opportunities for those who cannot make that timeframe work be should be discussed.

The new member group suggested that the speaker is secondary to their opportunity to

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connect with other members. This is consistent with feelings of the general members, as well. Several suggestions to improve the value of meetings emerged:

- Less emphasis on keynotes
- More meetings set aside exclusively for networking (i.e. at least 2 per year)
- More time to visit at every meeting
- Offerings outside of monthly meetings (coffee group, book club, etc.)
- Structured networking events (perhaps speakers who are networking experts and can facilitate)

The group felt that leadership in creating, communicating and managing additional gatherings should bubble up from general membership and not rely on the Board.

#### **Key Messages:**

1. Connecting and having personal interactions with other FEW members is equally, if not more important to today's new members, as our monthly speakers.
2. FEW needs to focus on creating more networking opportunities for members.

#### **Quotes**

*"When I come to FEW meetings, the people are a day-changer. I may show up feeling stressed, but I leave feeling refreshed every time."*

*"When joining FEW, there is an expectation of 'what you're going to get' in terms of the professional level and experience of the members."*

*"The ability to learn from the experience and wisdom of other members at my same professional level is invaluable to me."*

#### **Marketing FEW / Recruitment**

*Each focus group was asked what they would highlight about FEW if they were responsible for marketing it.*

Many of the conversations taking place in the initial half of the focus groups provided ideas on how to market the organization - particularly on the key messages that should be used. However, a few additional ideas emerged:

- Do not market it as a networking organization. It is a self-enrichment organization that has proven success in building better professional women in our community.
- Explain that topics go beyond a particular industry and often expose members to new thoughts and approaches.
- Ask membership to take a more active role.
- Highlight how FEW is a connecting place, a place where women can come to feel supported.
- Explain that FEW membership is what you make it – no more, no less than what you want it to be.
- Ask FEW members who are involved in other organizations to promote FEW with a quick announcement at those meetings whenever possible.
- Host a Chamber Connection on behalf of FEW.
- Highlight accessibility to influential women (especially seasoned members).
- Ask members to include their membership in FEW in their introductions at community events.
- Place more focus on members' ability to make FEW membership whatever a member wants/needs it to be - no pressure.

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- Watch for emerging leaders – send a note of congratulations from FEW and a guest pass, inviting them to check out FEW.
  - “My FEW.”

### **Key Messages:**

1. This is an opportunity for FEW to examine how the organization markets itself and who its real competitors are.
2. The unique culture and connections only FEW can bring are the reason that the “who’s who” of professional women are associated with the group. No other organization can offer it.
3. When asked about the exclusivity of FEW and whether that held back the organization’s growth, the consensus amongst participants was that current membership parameters need to be upheld.
4. New and general group participants understood the need for the organization to grow, but cautioned in doing so at the expense of the experience level of the membership involved. The groups felt that FEW does need to continue to recruit new members, but it was suggested it be done by focusing on gaining new members from other/new companies that have not historically been represented. Seasoned members did share more concern about an elitist image, but understood the value of maintaining parameters. They suggested more focus on the open, welcoming nature of the organization in marketing messages.

### *Quotes*

*“I came to FEW and learned how to be a leader by watching other women be leaders. This was perhaps the most personally rewarding time of my career.”*

*“FEW is an incubator for tomorrow’s community leaders.”*

*“I love how this huge mix of program topics pushes me to stretch my mind in so many new areas – I am constantly surprised to see how much I learn at the FEW programs.”*

### **Seasoned Members – Adding Value**

*The participants in the seasoned members focus group were asked to discuss how they view their role.*

The seasoned member focus group provided valuable insight into how this key group feels about its place in the organization today and how these members can continue to add value.

In many cases, as seasoned members retire from their careers, they find monthly programming less relevant and less necessary for devoting time to their former professional network. Many have since moved on, letting memberships lapse and losing touch with their former FEW “sisters,” however, there is still a strong desire to be involved.

All seasoned participants dearly miss the women of FEW. Every participant in the focus group shared an eager willingness to play a role in the future of the organization. They talked about wanting to enrich the membership experience for FEW’s current members.

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Seasoned participants had many ideas about how they could be involved and interact with current members:

- Mentorship opportunities
- One meeting per year as a panel discussion with founding members (all said they would participate)
- Hosting an annual Alumni Reception or “FEW Homecoming”
- Offering a “retired member” membership level

Ramping up seasoned member involvement would have a positive impact on the organization in many ways.

This is a specific opportunity for members to balance the organization’s ratio of young to mature women professionals. Seasoned members voiced fear of FEW’s membership trend skewing to a younger demographic and that the organization may someday be missing the knowledge, experience and connections brought by more seasoned members. This is an opportunity to bridge the gap.

FEW is looking for ways to add value to members. There are few opportunities more valuable to a younger professional woman than having a chance to talk with / have lunch with a pioneer in our business community. These opportunities are rare, but FEW can make it possible with a collaboration of groundbreaking women who are eager to share their gifts and wisdom.

#### **Key Messages:**

1. Seasoned members feel a strong connection with FEW and want to ensure the group moves forward.
2. They are less interested in programming, but are very interested in socializing with peers and offering mentorship.
3. They are more than willing to share their experiences and expertise as mentors to emerging leaders.
4. FEW should not lose sight of recruitment and retention of seasoned members.
5. FEW should potentially explore additional ways to involve seasoned members more with interacting with all levels of membership.

#### *Quote*

*“We came into FEW as pioneers. As the working world has completely changed, one thing has not, and that is the value that the women of this group have in our business community. It’s wonderful to see the direction things are going with these younger members being involved.”*

#### **Keeping the Connections Alive (After Retirement)**

Having expressed their desire to continue to maintain connections with FEW after retirement, Seasoned Members shared some ideas about what FEW could do to retain their involvement post-retirement:

- Offer a “retired member” membership level that would include access to the members-only portion of the website.
- As members retire, FEW should send a note of congratulations to the member along with guest pass(es) for future meeting(s).
- Host quarterly/semi-annual retirement celebrations for retiring members (which is also another connection opportunity for all FEW members). Invite retired members.
- Consider giving lifetime achievement awards or recognition to celebrate the accomplishments of retiring FEW members.
- Formalize a mentorship program.

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## Quote

*“Retiring FEW members are willing to do things to sustain this organization that has been such a large part of our careers. All you need to do is ask.”*

## In Summary. . .

The focus groups were valuable. We learned FEW members past and present are passionate about their organization. While by design or by delightful accident (likely a combination of both), members view FEW as a one-of-a-kind experience that cannot be found anywhere else.

Today, we emerge with many actionable ideas for retaining and growing membership and marketing the organization in the future. Some compelling key messages have surfaced. These will help FEW differentiate itself and speak to professional women through the eyes of FEW members using the messages that resonate best with working women professionals.

We have learned how to bridge the gap between the traditional roots of our founding mothers and the progressive pace of today’s emerging women leaders. We will seek ways to continue delivering value to our members without making them feel like *they* are expected to bring the value. Together, FEW will mold the business leaders of the future. After all, FEW is the place to be for top women professionals in the St. Cloud community.