



Easy *Doesn't* Do It

Forget a quiet game of golf.
Some folks make business
networking a real adventure

By Eileen P. Gunn

Stephanie Forte, a marketing consultant in Las Vegas, was trying to get down to business with a client not long ago, and it wasn't working.

The client, the owner of a company that helps produce trade shows and films, was launching a new business line and negotiating a partnership. He wanted to get Forte's input on some big-picture issues. But a steady flow of phone calls and other interruptions stalled the conversation. So Forte, a skilled rock climber who had met her client while scaling nearby Mount Charleston, suggested they reconvene for an early-morning climb.

"It worked perfectly," she says. "My client was able to detach, and we were

able to come to some conclusions about his company's plans."

Business people used to head to the nearest golf club when they needed to network or get colleagues and clients away from the office for some quality time together. But these days, for executives and entrepreneurs who are too active and overscheduled for a leisurely and time-consuming day on the fairways, adventure sports are a better fit.

"There is still a need for social, interactive activities outside of the office that allow for relationship building. But golf takes a lot of time, and you don't get much exercise," says Maurice Schweitzer, an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, who studies business relationships. "People are more active, more health conscious, and more individual-

istic today. They want to do things that reflect their own personality. And [adventure sports] can give you an intense experience without taking the entire Saturday."

These sports have become more mainstream, accessible, and upscale in recent years, making them more conducive to being used for business. Americans' participation in kayaking grew 23 percent between 2003 and 2005, according to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, a trade group. Rock climbing was up nearly 6 percent, hiking 5 percent, and trail running just under 5 percent. Moreover, more than half of the Americans who participated in outdoor sports in the United States in 2005 were older than 35, according to the foundation, and 27 percent had household incomes that exceeded \$80,000 a year, compared with





only 10 percent in that group in 1999.

Some of these folks are discovering adventure sports as adults, but many pursued them when they were younger and haven't given up being active as they've grown older. They also don't feel the need to fit a certain mold the way all those men in gray flannel suits did once upon a time. "I don't feel like because I hit a certain age I have to become a grown-up and play golf instead of climbing," says Forte, 39, who learned to climb while spending a few years after college working at a resort and snowboarding in Aspen, Colo.

No distractions. The sports that provide the best opportunities for networking and relationship building share one common aspect with golf. They buy people time to get to know each other better and to talk about business on a deeper

HANGING OUT. Stephanie Forte finds that rock climbing helps build business relationships.

level. They might even do a better job than golf does of getting people away from the petty distractions of the office, the cellphone, and the BlackBerry. As Paul Schaye, 54, the managing director for Chestnut Hill Partners, a private equity firm in New York, puts it, "You're not answering your cellphone when you're going downhill on a bike at 40 miles per hour."

For many executives, that's a good thing. Cathey Finlon, 60, the CEO of McClain Finlon, an advertising agency in Denver, has always been active and outdoorsy. Her husband plays golf, but she finds it "too slow" and instead prefers skiing and bike riding. She's taken a series of long-distance rides during vaca-

tions where she's met other business owners and executives. On one ride in Vietnam from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, she hit it off with another entrepreneur whose cycling pace matched her own, and she recalls, "We would go for miles talking about business books we were reading, decisions we were making, ideas we were working on."

But the attraction for some is that you don't have to be away for days at a time on a distant continent to have a satisfying experience practicing these sports or to use them to grease the gears of your business relationships. A climber with a mountain nearby can get out of bed early, do a series of short climbs, and still be in the office at 9 a.m. A surfer in Southern California can catch a few waves on the way home from work to release the day's stress and run into

other surfers doing the same thing.

Additionally, these sports are highly individualistic, require discipline, and tend to inspire intensity in their adherents. So practitioners see them as not just things they do but reflections of who they are, and they readily identify with others who share their passions.

Forte settled in Las Vegas so that she would have mountains nearby and went into business for herself so that she would have the time and flexibility to climb whenever she wanted. She says her clients who are also climbers understand her lifestyle choices more easily than those who aren't, and thus "a significant chunk of my business are people I meet through climbing."

Schaye recounts a weekend in the Hamptons on Long Island, N.Y., when he saw someone cycling alone and invited him to join his group. It turned out to be another banker whom he'd talked to on the phone but had never met. "We talked and got to be friends, and by the end of the ride we said we should find a way to work together," he recalls. They haven't ridden together since, but they did reconnect during a few investment deals their firms shared. And when Schaye wanted to start Chestnut Hill a few years later, this fellow rider persuaded his firm to put up the seed money.

Trust. Then there's the team-building aspect of adventure sports. "We interact with more strangers and have to get to know each other and build trust quickly," Schweitzer says. "Maybe after 10 years of golfing with you I'll feel a great bond with you, but it might only take two rappelling trips or a handful of rafting trips to feel really close with someone."

The bonding happens so quickly, he says, because whether someone is helping you change a flat bicycle tire in the middle of nowhere or holding your belaying ropes on a cliff face, "you're relying on the other person to keep you safe. That builds instant trust, and the trust transcends the experience."

Bill Hinz, the CEO of Western National Bank in Phoenix, excels at creating these kinds of experiences for his employees and clients. He and other members of the local Entrepreneurs Organization have mountain biked in Col-

orado, ocean kayaked in California, and shot along zip lines way above the jungle floor in Mexico. "When you push yourselves to the limit in these situations where you have to trust each other," Hinz says, "you break down barriers and can really talk about your business in a more in-depth way."

These situations also let you know quickly what a person is made of and if you want to do business with him or

injury. If fellow riders "leave you in the lurch to finish a bike ride, what are they going to do in a business situation when stuff really hits the fan?" he asks.

But aside from the character factor, there's also the sheer intensity of experience these sports provide. Between business and family obligations, overstretched executives feel guilty taking any recreational time out, even if they're mixing business with pleasure.

"Golf is structured in such a way that there is no chance anything incredible will happen during a round," says Hinz, so while he grew up playing the game in Arizona, he aims higher when he wants to impress someone. The CEO, whose bank puts together real-estate investment deals, brought several investors together last winter to buy land in Utah. To give them a look at the property, he flew them there in a small plane and had snowmobiles waiting. There was 3 feet of snow on the ground, and while it took these Sun Belt business people an hour or so to get the hang of the vehicles, once they did, "they were zipping around the property at 60 miles an hour and talking about it for days afterward," Hinz recalls. "I guarantee they'll be investors in anything else we do from now on."

It's become easier to do these activities in high-end ways that convey status and are gentle on the bones, both of which appeal to business people.

Andrea Nierenberg, the author of *Million Dollar Networking* and a consultant on building business relationships, routinely brings business cards with her when she hikes and—no surprise—has struck up several business relationships that way. But she usually does her trekking during spa weekends around the country.

When Hinz's group of entrepreneurs went to California last year, they spent their days ocean kayaking and hiking along seaside cliffs. But at night they rested their weary bones in featherbeds at the Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay.

"I make it a point to budget a considerable amount of my income toward these activities," he says. "We're not trying to suffer; we're just trying to put together events that are active and memorable and amazing." ●

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NO PHONES. Financier and cyclist Paul Schaye in Central Park

her. "I'll see someone fall off a wall and start yelling at their belayer and blaming the sun or the weather or the equipment instead of just admitting they need to focus better or practice more," says Forte. She will steer clear of that person both as a climbing buddy and as a business associate.

Similarly, Schaye says his rule is "on a long-distance ride, if I start with you, I finish with you. I don't leave anyone behind" when a tire pops, gears fail, or there's an