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Boise Chamber of Commerce starts new group for young professionals

By **Melissa McGrath**

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Conversation buzzed loudly in the crowded reception hall, drowning out the instrumental music that flowed lightly throughout the room a few minutes earlier. Glasses clinked. People laughed. Cell phones rang.

A couple hundred young people — dressed in button-up shirts, slacks and skirts — meandered through the Rose Room in Downtown Boise, juggling drinks and plates of hors d'oeuvres as they repeatedly reached out to shake hands with each other.

The newly formed Boise Young Professionals group met for the first time Tuesday afternoon to listen to author Stephen M.R. Covey before heading to the meet-and-greet reception that night at the Rose Room, off Idaho Street. The Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce organized the group to attract and retain young people in the Treasure Valley.

"Look at how many people are here," said Ilya Kucherenko, an account manager at Comsys, an information technology company, as he gazed around the Rose Room. "Obviously, it needed to happen."

Kucherenko and about 400 other people attended either part or all of the first meeting — Covey's two-hour presentation followed by the reception, said Ben Quintana, programs manager at the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce.

Quintana worked for about a year to get the group started. A 16-person steering committee, made up of local young professionals, looked at more than 130 similar groups across the country and organized local focus groups to discuss the need in Boise.

"The response was terrific," Quintana said. "The need for something like this in the community was evident. As we started working on this, I started getting a lot more phone calls from people from Pittsburgh and Seattle. As people move here, they are starting to ask, 'What's the deal with a young professionals group?'"

The group targets career-minded people, ages 21-40, but welcomes anyone over 21 years old.

Quintana asked Covey to speak at the event because he wrote the book "The Speed of Trust" about building trusting relationships. Covey is the son of Stephen R. Covey, who wrote "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People."

People from their early 20s to mid-40s crowded into the Egyptian Theatre and Rose Room earlier this week.

"I was just curious," said Katie Bonnette, a 23-year-old hardware design engineer at Hewlett-Packard. "It's a good thing for the community and great way to network."

Since moving to Boise less than two years ago, Bonnette said she hasn't had the opportunity to meet a lot of people her age. She hopes the Boise Young Professionals will change that.

"This is great because we get to meet people in the same life stage," said Fernando Rodriguez, 26, a senior teller at Washington Trust Bank. The bank is one of three companies sponsoring the group. Adecco Technical and HP also are sponsors.

Many of the young professionals said they plan to join the group because it sounds like one way they can get more involved in the local business community.

In the next year, Quintana wants to organize subcommittees among the first members to direct how the group grows.

"This could end up being something where we have a community service activity in one month and a professional development activity one month," he said. But he wants the group to decide that in the coming months.

The next meeting will be a question-and-answer session with Boise Mayor Dave Bieter.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Melissa McGrath at mmcgrath@idahostatesman.com or 377-6439.

