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## Designer's Appreciation Spreads the Word

Sometimes a simple "thank you" has a ripple effect. For Laura Robbins, of Laura Robbins Interiors of Maynard, gratitude travels exponentially. Robbins, who opened her own residential and commercial design firm two years ago, wanted to do something to honor the tradespeople and suppliers who helped launch her company. To no surprise, many of Robbins' contacts were feeling the effects of the economy. For the most part, these colleagues are small business owners and over the last several months, she heard consistent comments. "People were saying it's tough out there—that things were slowing down. They were getting nervous," Robbins remarked. She realized that the best way to give back to the businesses that have provided support to her was to help keep their operations flourishing.

To that end, Robbins partnered with Rick Woodland and Mark Giacchetto, co-owners of Terrene Sustainable Building Supply in Acton, to sponsor a networking event calculated to embrace all facets of the local design industry. Robbins, who was providing design assistance for a customer across the street, stopped in to the Terrene showroom recently to select paint samples, and concluded that the space would be a perfect location in which a group of like minded businesses could make contact.

"Often designers are close to the vest when it comes to sharing resources," Robbins commented. "They don't want others to discover their secrets. But the economy is changing things. People are looking for new ways to do business as well as to keep the people they like to work with, in business too."

Robbins recognized that she could provide a benefit to the resources that she depends on by introducing them to others in the industry that may also need their skills. "People are always asking; 'Do you know the name of a good architect or designer?'" This way you establish an entrepreneurial environment and pull everyone together in a room." Culling contacts from her own files, she created a list of 80-90 names to which she sent on-line invitations to the "Laura's List: Design Build Networking Event," which was held at Terrene on Great Road in Acton on September 29. Each invitee was encouraged to forward the invite to resources who could also gain by participating in the event. "It just mushroomed," said Robbins. In the end, almost 200 online invitations were forwarded, with over 100 people attending.

Surrounded by samples of bamboo, cork, glass and other sustainable materials displayed in the Terrene showroom,

attendees traded business cards and tips, with the objective of maintaining and growing each other's businesses. Designers, architects, builders, general contractors, as well as trade professions such as painters and electricians introduced themselves and began to cultivate relationships, over complimentary beer, wine, and trays of imported cheeses. Local artisans, lighting design professionals, civil and structural engineers as well as retailers and vendors providing products for design and build projects, also attended.

Feedback on the event was overwhelmingly positive. Carol Cataldo a sales/design representative, one of four employees from Forever Tile in West Concord who attended the event, described the gathering as well timed and well attended. "Things have been harder since the spring. Right now home related businesses are looking for new resources they can work with. Our own advertisements are mostly word of mouth. We've never been to anything like this and I was surprised how many people it drew. There were representatives who came from the Boston Design Center as well as a well-known interior designer from New Hampshire. Because we could all invite our own contacts, it was an eclectic crowd that brought different

people together. We passed out so many business cards--more of this would be a good thing.”

By the time she woke up early the next morning, Laura Robbins had already received twelve emails in response to the event, some from individuals seeking to contact participants, others simply complimenting the results.

Rick Woodland, who opened his Terrene franchise with his brother-in-law last November, called the event an absolute success. “I was hoarse the next day. There was a real buzz and feel to it; you could watch people making connections. We’ve been networking with people like Laura for nine months. The up-tick in business from this event will benefit us

all.” Just two days after the get-together, Woodland had received several follow up phone calls as well as walk in traffic generated from the “Laura’s List” evening--a sure sign that one business owner thanking other business owners is bound to help everyone out.