

Ethnic groups bring us a world of business

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Those gathered in the sixth-floor conference room earlier this week looked and sounded like a mini United Nations.

But the talk wasn't international politics or intrigue. This was strictly business.

Folks were gathered to announce a first-of-its-kind collaboration in the Tampa Bay area. A number of business groups, including the Brazilian, Chinese, Indian, Hispanic, Caribbean, Filipino, French and British chambers of commerce, are planning an International Business Summit in May.

This is the sunny side of the immigration debate. Ethnic groups have economic clout, and the summit is a great way to flaunt it.

Many of those who come to America bring their entrepreneurial spirit and their internationalist world views. They often see business opportunities beyond the state where they live.

The summit will be held at the University of South Florida Sun Dome on May 18 and 19, to showcase ethnically owned businesses as well as large U.S. corporations.

The event is open to the public and will feature workshops, seminars, motivational speakers, cultural events and lots of ethnic food.

More than 150 vendors are expected to set up shop in the exhibition hall.

Those who attend will be educated, energized and entertained, said Derek Lloyd, president of the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce of Tampa Bay, which is based in Land O'Lakes and is one of the organizers of the summit. The goal is to highlight the international flavor of these businesses and show how they fit into the framework of the larger Tampa Bay area business community.

Lloyd, a native of Trinidad, saw how a similar event transformed the various small ethnic business groups into a unified economic and business force in the Orlando area.

After his group was founded last year, he started putting out feelers for the ambitious summit. He didn't have any trouble persuading representatives of other ethnic and regional business

groups to join in. This was a long-overdue opportunity to network with each other, highlight opportunities for international business and promote cultural awareness among the larger community.

"Tampa Bay has become a melting pot with so many people moving here from different places," said Zoraida Sempritt, president of the summit and chairwoman of the Tampa Bay Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, another participating group.

The 2,500-member Indo-U.S. Chamber of Commerce is a very visible ingredient in that growing Tampa Bay business melting pot.

Founded in 1998, the group includes people in the health care, informational technology, hospitality, real estate, finance and legal industries. The organization has been trying to raise its profile and educate the public about India - beyond the controversial issue of outsourcing low-paying jobs.

Last year, the Indo-U.S. Chamber cosponsored the "Demystifying India" exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry in Tampa. An international business summit sounded like the next logical step.

"For a while we've been looking to do something like this," said Indo-U.S. Chamber of Commerce vice president Rachana Dinkar.

"The timing is perfect."

For information on the 2007 International Business Summit visit www.ibsummit.org.

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