



## **BUILDING YOUR NETWORKING SKILLS**

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Some lawyers are naturals at marketing. They instinctively know how to build a network, sniff out opportunities, innovate on developing new billing, uses of technology or other service opportunities to attract clientele. More, however, are NOT naturals, and must be taught.

In bygone days, the concept of teaching marketing involved taking young lawyers along to appointments and quasi-social events here and there, and letting them watch the “master” in action. If they were smart, they learned to swim by observing and copying the successful traits of others. If they were not, they sank like a stone.

Of course, in those days it was a far more hospitable environment in which to develop ones skills. More clients. Fewer attorneys. No mega-firms with in-house professional marketing staff to compete with. Room to learn by trial and error. So even if an attorney didn’t have great “bedside manner”, so to speak, if he was a good technician and worked diligently on behalf of the client at reasonable rates, the work was there for the taking.

No so any more. Nowadays the luxury of trial and error is very limited. Clients often expect “razzle dazzle” over and above the diligence and technical skills. At the least they want good “bedside manner.” And since attorneys learn more by doing than by studying, it is vitally important to young attorneys to begin developing the most fundamental and essential marketing skill as early as possible: networking. Think of this as the foundation upon which your “house” of marketing skills will be built. Without a solid foundation you will never successfully build further.

This article offers some introductory words of wisdom on building your networking skills. It is not comprehensive by any means. However, if you contact me I can refer you to a wealth of articles and books to assist you further on this topic. Master these simple techniques first and early on, and then read and apply what you’ve read to learn how to develop your skills further.

1. **BE OUT THERE.** Start with the bar association, but move quickly to whatever professional associations your clients or prospects or possible referral sources belong to. Most major associations have lots of local chapters, but even if it means there is no local chapter and there is a long drive, get there. You must be out and visible. Sometimes new matters develop as a result of short conversations you have with table-mates at a professional meeting.

Add additional organizations to your repertoire as soon as possible, but choose them based on your interests, not on where you anticipate clients are. You will be amazed at the people you will meet at these events. Sometimes the biggest clients come from meetings at non-professional events. At the least, you continue to expand your network of people you know, and your skills at meeting and greeting new faces.

2. LISTEN. Attorneys are viewed as public people. People expect more from an attorney, and usually value and solicit the attorney's opinion on just about any topic of interest. So it becomes easy to dominate the conversation with words of wisdom. Try *not* to do that. Instead, ask people around you what frustrates them about using legal counsel and why. Ask them what challenges they face every day in work or personally. Ask them what their professional needs are today, and how those needs will change tomorrow. Count this as free market research for your practice. Be confident that they will remember the attorney who demonstrates good listening skills.

3. COLLECT and FOLLOW UP. At every meeting set a goal of meeting and speaking with at least six new people. Be sure to get their business cards or, if they don't have one, obtain their contact information and put it on the back of one of yours and put it aside. As soon as possible during or after the meeting, make a note on the card about what you discussed, their needs, what they do, etc. Note everything you can, so that later this individual will be memorable.

When you return to the office, get this information into your contacts database, so the key words become searchable. (Yes, that's right, no manual rolodex.) If you have any written articles, web site addresses, or even a news clipping about something you discussed, take a moment to *hand write* a short note and send it along with the information. If you send a typed letter it will be obvious you're "fishing" for work. If you send a hand written note it will make you appear friendly and interested in the individual's needs. And they will be flattered to have made an impression on you.

As you come across or develop information on topics, you can quickly search your contacts database to see if there are any "hits" for the subject matter, which can provide an excuse for a repeat contact.

4. SHOW UP. Woody Allen coined the phrase "80% of success is showing up", and this certainly applies to networking. Even if you don't feel like it, show up. On evenings when it's cold and raining and you would rather stay home, show up. These are the best times to go to a meeting. The people who do show up are motivated, which means they will be more likely to be interested in what you do, and to share valuable information about themselves. And if nothing else, you can always talk about the weather.

5. VOLUNTEER. Showing up and forcing yourself to interact with others will get even the most staunch introvert into a comfortable networking mindset after a while. Once you've gotten the least bit comfortable, it's time to volunteer to serve on a committee or help plan an event. It provides one of the best ways to maximize your networking opportunities. It tells others you are interested. It gives others an opportunity to see you "in action", so that you can demonstrate some of your skills to key people in the organization. These are



the individuals who can turn into wonderful referral sources within or outside the organization.

This is where your personal interests can also make a contribution to your success. One attorney I know developed many of his largest client relationships through coaching his son's soccer league. He was attentive enough to quickly realize the networking opportunity presented by getting to know the parents of the children on the team. Another attorney I know did the same by becoming very involved and achieving a leadership role in her church never before reached by a woman. By using their networking skills each were able to seamlessly tie their personal interests to marketing opportunities. As a result, both are highly successful, and also have a high degree of satisfaction in their personal lives.

If you are not a young attorney starting out, share this article with someone who is. Even introverts can successfully learn to network. It just takes a little practice. It also helps to keep in mind that many of the people you will talk to are also introverts struggling with the same issues.

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