



NETWORKING: THE DEFT TOUCH

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Some lawyers are naturals at marketing. They instinctively know how to build a network, easily engage all they meet in conversation, have their “antennae up” to recognize and sniff out opportunities, and innovate to develop new service opportunities to attract clientele. Most attorneys, however, are NOT naturals, and must learn these skills. If you are one of the less fortunate in terms of natural ability, be assured that nowadays there are a multitude of resources to assist you in developing the necessary skills. And it’s never too late to do so.

The most fundamental skill to develop is that of networking and building personal relationships. You must be able to master this skill. 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. And in an environment where the majority of your work will always come through word of mouth, you can never forget that building and maintaining networks and relationships is not an optional skill.

Client relationships are very personal. Even in BigLaw firms where many faceless associates may do the work for the client, there is still the “relationship partner” who ensures the client’s needs are met, and that the client is made to feel important and properly cared for. Words like “trust” “partner” and “reliable” are part of the vocabulary happy clients use when describing their attorney relationship to others.

Likewise, referral relationships are very personal. When someone makes a referral they must feel comfortable about it on several levels. They must feel confident that the attorney to whom they refer will do a good job. Otherwise, it will reflect badly upon the referring party. Plus, of course, if the referring party is an attorney, vicarious liability issues create more of a need to feel confident that the referred party will be properly cared for. A referral source must also feel confident that the referred party will be treated with the care and attention they would expect for themselves. The referring party also needs to feel that the referral will be appreciated. The bottom line is that the referring party has many choices, and your personal relationship with him or her will determine whether you are the one chosen to receive the referral.

But let's back this marketing train up for a moment. Let's not get ahead of ourselves with maintaining client relationships. Because before you do anything, you need to get to know people. Before someone becomes a client or referral source, they are a stranger. You must transform them from a stranger to someone with mutual familiarity. And then to someone with whom you have a relationship.

You need to know how to do the simple things first; offer a warm and solid handshake, make a friendly pat on the back, find mutual interests to create an engaging and memorable conversation. You then need to keep track of all the people you meet. In most instances you will need to proactively follow-up to build and further develop the relationship.

Maybe as you read this you're thinking that you also need to know where to go to find the "right" people. That's not entirely wrong, especially as you progress in your career and work fills most of your time; you will need to maximize the return for your invested time. But never lose sight of the fact that there are no wrong places to go or people to meet. There is potential and opportunity everywhere.

I once had the pleasure of working with a young attorney who practiced primarily business law. Through his young son he became active in a youth athletic league as an assistant. He stayed involved because he enjoyed it, and eventually, after many years, became a team coach. One day, during a lull in play, he gazed into the stands. There sat the proud parents of the players. He knew most of the parents almost as well as their child who played on the team. And then, all of a sudden, it struck him like a bolt of lightning; a marketing epiphany. Most of those parents were business owners. They were not just parents of the children he coached, but prospective clients with whom he already had a familiar and cordial relationship. How had he not seen this opportunity before, he wondered?

The attorney gave a great deal of thought to the types of conversations he might have to let a parent know not just that he was an attorney, but the type of attorney he was and what he might be able to offer if called upon. He created some "vignettes" in his head about interesting matters he helped recent clients with. During casual conversation he took opportunities to mention how good he felt about something he had recently accomplished for someone, and then casually asked clients whether they ever experienced a similar situation. Repeatedly, the response was "I wish I knew about what you did last [week / month / year] when I had a similar situation!" "Well, if I can ever help in the future . . ." he would respond.

This simple strategy multiplied his practice five-fold within 2 years of the moment his antennae finally went up. The point being, meeting people and



establishing a relationship of some sort is important. But recognizing the potential in each person you meet is just as or more important.

OK, let's back up again. Let's say you're in a situation where there are other people around. Strangers all, but networking opportunities as well. Maybe you're at a social event, or a bar event, or a religious or political event, or maybe just standing with a bunch of strangers along Broad Street waiting for a parade to begin. It doesn't matter where. The question is always how to break the ice and engage someone in conversation.

As Leil Lowndes suggests in "How to Talk to Anyone" the number 1 technique for breaking the ice is with a smile.

Don't flash an immediate smile when you greet someone, as though anyone who walked into your line of sight would be the beneficiary. Instead, look at the other person's face for a second. Pause. Soak in their persona. Then let a big, warm, responsive smile flood over your face and overflow into your eyes. It will engulf the recipient like a warm wave. The split-second delay convinces people your flooding smile is genuine and only for them.

Wouldn't life be simple if we could just accomplish our relationships with a warm smile? But that's not enough. It's just the start; the proverbial foot in the door. You need to master the art of small talk. That's the next crucial step needed toward the goal of becoming a versatile and engaging conversationalist and strong communicator.

What holds most people back from mastering small talk is the belief that our conversation must be funny, smart, or insightful from the beginning. We want to "razzle dazzle" our listeners. And as our minds cast about trying to find the right words, we mentally freeze like a deer in the headlights. Meanwhile, your target contact slips away, and the opportunity is lost. That only exacerbates the problem during the next opportunity.

The reality is that small talk isn't really about specific facts or words. It's about putting people at ease by matching their mood and finding some point of mutuality. It's not about what you say, but how you say it. And in fact, the more mundane and non-original your opening gambit, as long as it is not complaining, rude or unpleasant, the more likely there will be something which your listener can agree upon.



A successful ice breaking technique involves the use of a prop; anything you can wear or carry that is unusual, whether it is a tie, pin, hat, or even unusual pair of glasses. It provides those who would like to speak to you an easy conversation opener, and enables you to respond in kind without needing to wrack your brain for words. Being able to spot a prop also provides you with an ice-breaker to start a conversation. A comment about an unusual piece of jewelry, school ring, or even a pair of socks can afford you an easy opportunity to open a conversation with a compliment or request for information regarding the prop. Case in point: my relationship with my fiancé began with his noticing and complimenting me on my unusual socks.

Once the ice is broken, the conversation needs to continue for some period of time. You don't want an awkward cone of silence descending immediately following your opening line. There are millions of potential subjects to choose from: observations about the gathering or current events; questions about people's background or connection to the host; remarks about whatever is new or interesting in your profession. Create and memorize your "cheat list" in advance of walking in the door, and you will have all the confidence you need to take full advantage of the networking opportunity.

There are lots of ice-breaking techniques, and even more conversational techniques. Take a look at the additional reading list which accompanies this article, and plan to continue your education. Then practice by doing. Lawyers learn by doing, not just by reading. So read first, but then put what you've read into action as quickly as possible. Your successes, no matter how small, will encourage you to try, and ultimately master additional techniques. Before you know it, you will be transformed into the dynamic conversationalist you aspire to be.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting with a newly-minted lawyer to discuss at length the importance and methodology of networking within the overall framework of building a practice. I emphasized that sufficient time and energy had to be devoted to be "out and visible" in as many spheres as possible. Getting to know people in a variety of contexts will eventually reward the efforts with a widespread set of networks which begin to offer opportunities for expansion and business generation. In addition, it helps provide exposure to environments which may prove significantly rewarding on other levels.

A lawyer friend of mine was always very active in her church. She found her participation sufficiently rewarding on many levels; she continued to play an ever-increasing role in the congregation's activities.



Her volunteer work with the church included reaching out to the disenfranchised and elderly in the neighboring community. Over the years she built a reputation for generosity and intelligence based on genuine empathy and a strong sense of social responsibility. Ultimately her personality, disposition and interests led to her to concentrate in elder and estates law. Concurrently, the network she developed within her own congregation and the surrounding community helped her develop a very successful practice.

The art of meeting people, putting them at ease, building mutual rapport and respect, and exchanging knowledge regarding each other is the basis of networking. And it's something you can learn to excel at. But you're not done by any means once you've accomplished this skill set. You have to actually put it to work for you in order to realize any return for your efforts. In other words, you need to convert strangers to acquaintances, acquaintances to prospects, and prospects to clients or referral sources. And you need to do all of this without letting any of your previous efforts go wasted. That means that you need some methodology to remember who you've met, to keep in touch, and to further develop the relationship. And that's where the need for best practices, organization, and technology come into play.

Best practices include not just having those opening lines and conversation clinchers memorized and at the ready, but also having your "elevator speech" ready for the moment someone asks you "What do you do?" and you have only 20 seconds in which to respond with something meaningful and memorable from their perspective. It means always having some clean, untattered business cards on your person. (Ok, if you're at the gym, having them in your locker is an acceptable compromise!) It means always having a pen handy, too.

When someone gives you their business card, as soon as possible when you are out of sight, write down on the back as much as possible about the person while the conversation is fresh in your mind. Even a few facts about an unusual prop which provided an opening line, a family member name, or a mentioned business associate can prove exceptionally helpful later in recalling the person and/or reopening the door. What do you do if they have no business card? Simple. Take out your own, ask them to provide some information, and write it on the back of your own card.

Once back at the office, put the information in your computer. It's not necessary to have an expensive relationship-management software program (CRM) like Act or Goldmine.



Your Outlook Contacts works just fine for this purpose. Remember that you have a “details” tab in which to enter things like assistant and spouse names, birthdays and anniversaries, (which automatically go on your calendar so you don’t forget to acknowledge), and other information. The “free text” area can hold any piece of information you can imagine. When I meet a prospect I go to their web site, and copy their entire biography into the free text area. If they have a photo on the web site I also paste that into their contact.

Use the category feature of Outlook to add additional sorting power for mailing lists, eNewsletters, and so forth. You will probably want categories for such broad areas as prospect, client, former client, competitor, vendor, expert, classmate, referral source and so forth, as well as finite areas such as practice areas, areas of interest, counties, and so forth. Since an unlimited number of categories can apply to a single contact, it’s a fast and efficient way to include a contact in multiple filtered lists. Contacts are searchable by every single field and text item.

Next, you need a mechanism to follow up. This is ridiculously simple in Outlook. Simply “flag” the contact for a specific date and time to follow up. When the selected time arrives, the contact reminder pops up, and you need only click on it to open it up. If you’ve followed these simple instructions, you’ll have phone, email, mailing address all at the ready, along with sufficient notes to enable you to start a conversation or write a note or email which clearly communicates you remember the person.

Let’s put theory to practice. You read a summary or news article about a recent court case which you believe will be of interest to several people – prospects – you’ve met over the years. You put the key word into your Outlook contacts search box and within seconds it presents you with possibilities. A brief review of those contacts determines which are actually opportunities. You may repeat your search using a few different key words, and locate even more opportunities which are “on target.”

And this brings me to the next concept. How does one purposefully target, pursue and create a network? It begins with strategic intelligence.

Let’s go back to my meeting with the newly-minted attorney. Like too many attorneys in today’s economic climate, he has graduated and passed the bar with no job offer in hand. He is very smart, has gone to the “right” schools, is extremely personable, and I have no doubt he will ultimately be a skillful attorney and successful rainmaker.



This young man has thought long and hard about possible career choices. He is not only willing, but hopeful that he will find a small to midsize firm anywhere in PA, preferably not in a major metropolitan area, in which to develop his skills. He is more than willing to forego BigFirm salary dollars for greater client contact, more challenging work, mentoring, and some quality of life. But how does he find such a firm?

I know from experience that such firms are clamoring for young attorneys such as he. My suggestions for strategic intelligence to find them included the following:

1. Go to the web site of the PA Bar Association, and locate county information. Obtain the names and telephone numbers of county bar presidents and county bar executive directors. Enter each into his database.
2. Call each bar president and ask for assistance in getting referrals to any firm which might be looking for associate assistance. Get at least one name/firm to call before the call ends.
3. Call each executive director and ask if the county provides any vehicle for posting or distributing his resume. Also find out if the executive director is aware of any firms looking for an associate.
4. Use Google to locate firms in desirable geographic areas, or with desirable practice areas. Eliminate those which are too big or too small. Put the firm information and name of at least one name partner into his database. Call the partner to inquire as to whether they are hiring.
5. After following steps 1 thru 4 be sure to update the contacts regarding information obtained, date(s) called, referral names provided and so forth. Some day this information will be more important than he can imagine now.
6. Submit resumes through law firm web sites whenever possible.
7. Use Monster.com, CraigsList and other online job sites.
8. List his resume in the PBA web site Job Search area.

I have helped many attorneys over the year with strategic intelligence. It's as much art as science, but ultimately there can be no substitute for doing the research work. And there are always opportunities to gather meaningful information. For example, when you meet people, be sure to ask things like what charities or other activities they're active in. What are their outside interests? What organizations do they belong to? How about your clients and prospects. . . do you know, for example, what business-related magazines they read? Where do they



go for education in their field? Who are the trusted colleagues they most often seek out for referral to an attorney? All of this information will best enable you to target and pursue.

No article about networking today can be complete without reference to the new internet-based social networking tools. Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn are not the only ones, but they are the clear leaders thus far, with 80 million, 200 million and 20 million or so members, respectively. Not a week goes by that does not bring several invitations to my inbox from attorneys asking me to join their social network. Think of the ability to target virtually any market segment and track down in a relatively short time period at least one person you know who is connected to that segment.

The ability to build and maintain one or more networks of relationships is the most basic requirement to building a practice. It starts with a warm smile and an ability to break the ice and engage in simple conversation. Small talk provides an opportunity to build rapport and gain information which leads to the next step in relationship building. It also provides information which enables you to learn how to target and pursue more successfully in the future. With good practices, a little preparation, and consistent follow-up, you will be able you to build one of the most important assets you will have in your career – your contacts database bulging with clients, prospects and referral sources.

Recommended Additional Reading:

Women Rainmakers' Best Marketing Tips by Theda C. Snyder

Rainmaking Made Simple: What Every Professional Must Know by Mark M. Maraia

Personal Marketing and Selling Skills by Catherine Alman MacDonagh and Beth Marie Cuzzone

Marketing Success Stories: Conversations with Leading Lawyers by Hollis Hatfield Weishar and Joyce K. Smiley

The Complete Guide to Marketing Your Law Practice by Hollis Hatfield Weishar and James A. Durham

The Lawyer's Field Guide to Effective Business Development by William J. Flannery, Jr.



The Fine Art of Small Talk: How to Start a Conversation, Keep It Going, Build Networking Skills — and Leave a Positive Impression! By Debra Fine

The Art of Mingling: Proven Techniques for Mastering Any Room by Jeanne Martinet

How to Talk to Anyone by Leil Lowndes

The LinkedIn Personal Trainer by Steven Tylock

I'm On LinkedIn . . . Now What??? by Jason Alba

Facebook Marketing: Leverage Social Media to Grow Your Business by Steven Holzner

Facebook: The Missing Manual by E. A. Vander Veer

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