

# Want to Build Business? Here's How to Be a Better Networker

Few would argue that networking always has been and likely always will be an important aspect of building and maintaining a successful law practice. Networking is how lawyers connect with prospective clients and referral sources, build trust and loyalty, and develop the types of individual relationships that can lead to new business.



**Jaffe Staff**

It's also time-consuming and, for most of us, not particularly easy or fun.

So, it is not surprising that more and more busy lawyers have embraced social media and digital marketing to expand their network of contacts. While these tools give us a platform for making connections on a large scale, the relationships we develop this way typically are not as deep as those we nurture through in-person contact.

## 6 Lawyer Networking FAQs

When coaching attorneys on their business development activities, I frequently am asked for pointers for how to make in-person networking less time-consuming and more effective. Answers to a few key questions can put this into perspective.

### 1. It seems there are events I could attend nearly every day. How do I know which are the best?

- **Revisit your goals.** The best events are those that help you reach your marketing and business development goals. If you are looking to raise your profile in a particular industry, attend events where people involved in the industry will be. If you want to cement your relationship with a key client, ask them which events they would recommend you attend to learn more about their business or their industry. If you are a younger attorney who needs to develop a profile and a network, attend as many different types of events as you can.
- **Review attendee lists.** Some events will make the attendee list available in advance of the meeting. Request a copy, and review it to get an idea of whether there are people attending who would be worth meeting. If the event is predominantly attended by people you already know or those whose positions or employers are not in your business development "sweet spot," you may want to find another event, unless, of course, you can use the event to hone your networking skills. An event where less is at stake can make you feel more comfortable.
- **Remember why you're there.** You network to develop relationships, which takes time and goes beyond one brief conversation. The best professional networking groups operate as business information, idea and support exchanges, providing opportunity for you to really

get to know someone. Sometimes, this might be more easily accomplished by attending a meet-up of a group of people with the same hobbies than through a bar association meeting.

## 2. Most of these events last a couple of hours. How do I make sure I am not wasting my time?

- **Set three attainable goals.** Do not let yourself become overwhelmed because there are 500 people attending a convention in one of your targeted industries. Go into the event with a few attainable goals, such as meeting specific individuals, meeting five new people, speaking with the host or chairperson about assisting with a future event, introducing a colleague to one of your contacts, or meeting a high-profile speaker.
- **Set a realistic time limit.** Instead of feeling as though you have to stay for the duration of the event, take some of the pressure off by committing to being engaged for one hour, or some other realistic and comfortable period of time. Not only will this keep you fresh and engaged, you are more likely to attend more events if you set boundaries on the amount of time you commit.

## 3. I find it difficult to initiate a conversation with a stranger. How do I start?

- **Arrive early.** If you get there early, the room will walk into you, whereas if you walk in late, people will already be mid-conversation when you arrive.
- **Look for an opportunity to engage someone.** If the room is crowded and there seem to be many conversations underway, look for people who are standing alone. One-on-one may be more comfortable and can make for effective networking.
- **Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know anyone there.** Approach a group with a smile on your face, and simply ask, "May I join you?" No one ever replies, "No, we don't want you."

## 4. What do I talk about? If I don't know someone well, it can be a challenge to find something to discuss.

- **Your primary job is to listen.** The worst thing you can do when networking is turn it into a sales pitch. Networking should be about building a quick rapport – it should be informal, brief, interesting and leave people wanting to know more. People bond over commonalities. Sales pitches have the opposite effect.
- **Build a bank of conversation starters.** Catching up on current events and being knowledgeable in a variety of general topics will help you make meaningful contributions to conversations.
- **Follow the event on social media.** Many organizations will set up a Twitter feed with a specific hashtag as a way to share information about the event and engage attendees in discussion before and after.

## 5. I know I shouldn't talk to the same few people the entire time. How do I make a graceful exit from a conversation?

- **It's OK, indeed, appropriate to move on.** Unless the conversation is very promising, plan to spend no more than four to six minutes with any one individual. After that, you should be prepared to move on. You also don't want to take up too much of the other person's time. They are there for the same reasons you are. Remember, you feel more uncomfortable about leaving the interaction than the other person. It's acceptable to say that you have to make a phone call, get a drink, go to the restroom or say hello to someone you haven't seen.

- **Make an introduction.** Offer to introduce someone you've met to someone else you met or know in the room. This allows you to gracefully move on while also helping others expand their network.

- **Glass half full. Literally.** Carry a half glass of beverage and order only half a glass of beverage to more easily facilitate separation.

## 6. I attended four events this month. Why haven't I gotten any new work?

- **Relationships take time.** It takes time for people to have confidence in you and form a relationship with you. You cannot expect someone to send you work just because they met you at an event. Instead, focus on investing in others. Find ways to be helpful, provide information, tell them of an opportunity that might interest them or introduce them to others beneficial to their own network. The rest will come.

- **Follow up, and keep at it.** If you have followed your networking plan for the event, you are on your way to developing a relationship. That said, you should not consider the event to be "over" until you have followed up. Send an email to those you met, following up on your conversation or providing information you promised to send. If you would like to develop a stronger relationship with a few particular people you met, consider giving them a call rather than sending an email.

The key to successful networking is to remember that you are building real, deep relationships with your contacts. What good is a network full of people who don't know you very well? The more you foster trust and rapport with those you meet, the more you can begin forging new avenues of business.

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