EFFECTIVE NETWORKING FOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT:
BUILDING CONTACTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

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In a recent survey of practicing lawyers, over 80% responded that networking was an important component of their personal business development plan. In fact, research suggests that networking is one of the top five reasons lawyers become involved in bar activities, including the Section of Business Law (the "Section"). Networking has been recognized for decades as a foundational means of business development.

A 1994 article discussed the importance of networking:

During the past decade law firms have experienced a significant change. Things just aren't the way they used to be. During better times, business was easier to acquire and maintain. Client fee sensitivity, competition, specialization, and poor public image have made the practice of law much more difficult. It requires much more effort to manage and sustain a successful law practice.

Smith, Making Contact: The Importance Of Networking In A Changing Business Environment, Association of Legal Administrators Newsletter (June 1994). The importance of networking is even more crucial in 2005. While the term "networking" is well-known, effective networking is a concept foreign to many lawyers.

As the legal profession continues evolving as a business, the key components of building a successful law practice largely remain unchanged. At the core of most successful law practices is client service built on a commitment to excellence, responsiveness and cost-effective representation. As one author noted, "the basics get you in the game, then the relationship takes over." Beckwith, What Clients Love, (Warner Books 2003). The basics--knowledge and expertise in a given area of the law--are a vital component of any client development activities. Once the basics are established, however, you have to distinguish yourself through relationships and contacts.

The foundation of building a client base through networking includes maintaining existing clients through expanded business relationships to better understand the client and meet its needs. This includes the concept of cross-selling opportunities for those existing clients to expand your representation into other areas of their business. A second foundation of building a client base is the acquisition of new clients. A common denominator in both of these building
blocks to growing and sustaining a successful law practice is acquiring and sustaining meaningful relationships with clients, potential clients and others who can refer you business, including lawyers.

Networking must be the personal responsibility of each attorney. It involves maintaining regular contacts with clients, lawyers, industry leaders, and accountants. Success is predicated on building relationships, making contacts and systematically working on business development each day. Networking is "building relationships with anyone who can help you grow your practice." Boress, Cummings & Schneider, Best Practices in Building Your Personal Network for Attorneys (Sage Law Marketing 2004). The top rainmakers "see themselves as experts in the relationship business...[they] consciously and systematically have built a comprehensive network of vital relationships with their clients, colleagues, professional allies, referral sources, influencers and communities of interest." Id. The ultimate goal of networking is to develop business for your practice.

Experts agree that effective networking involves determining your networking purposes and goals. You should identify possible contacts and develop a plan to ensure building upon these contacts. Be involved with organizations in which your best contacts, potential clients and referral sources are involved. Attorneys should develop a client development plan that includes a personal plan of action on networking with colleagues and/or potential clients. Use existing contacts to make more introductions at events. Determine one or two of the best organizations, whether national or local bar organization, trade association or other gatherings of prospective referrals, and set a plan in motion to become active in the group's efforts. By way of example, the Section's Young Lawyer Forum ("YLFF") is an excellent opportunity to take on projects, meet new people, and start building your national network of contacts.

Once you have identified the correct organizations to plug into, maximize your visibility. Opportunities include working on programs or membership initiatives. Identify a moribund committee and breathe new life into it. Take responsibility for a job that no one wants and do a great job with it. Identify a gap in the organization's programming or activities and develop a plan to address it. One excellent example is the Section's Institute for the New Business Lawyer (the "Institute"). Several years ago, YLF leader David Gemunder noted a lack of focused programming at the Section's Spring Meeting addressing legal basics for younger lawyers. After noting this issue, he developed a detailed plan to fill in the gap. Section leaders approved the plan, and with a lot of hard work by David, the Section's staff and others, the Institute has become a remarkable success in providing significant benefit to younger lawyers.

Each of these types of opportunities offers contact with many people and an opportunity to perform where it will be noticed. Start by setting goals for your work in the organization. If you want to speak at a meeting, start by helping plan a program. If you want to publish an article, start with helping a committee chair compile a synopsis of new cases in a particular area of the law. Impress the group's leaders by doing the behind-the-scenes work that others do not want to do, and you will build credibility for more visible projects in the future. If you undertake a project in a bar organization, ensure it is something that you can complete successfully and impressively.
Effective networking involves a commitment of time, energy, and resources to produce meaningful results. An attorney must care for the network, including personal contact with clients and potential clients through e-mails, calls, newsletters, and visits. One commentator equates effective networking with a gardener caring for his or her garden. If you come across an article or case that may be of interest to a client or potential client, send it to them with a note pointing out the importance of the material. Remember client birthdays, acknowledge important achievements, or determine a client's favorite hobby or sports team. Use this information to build relationships. The fact that you are thinking about the client will pay huge dividends. In this light, the use of technology to care for and feed your network cannot be overstated.

Once you establish mutual points of interest with the client and/or your network, set concrete steps to build the relationship. This may include taking a client to a sporting or cultural event. Support the client's charitable activities through a donation or active involvement if it is an area of interest for you. The most compelling message you can deliver to clients and potential clients is not what a wonderful lawyer you are; rather, it is "I understand what you need." Beckwith, Selling the Invisible (Warner Books 1997). In order to be successful in connecting with your client and potential client, "find out what they want; find out what they need; find out who they are." Id. This type of relationship building takes time, but it will provide a big benefit in the long run.

Effective networking should include building relationships with other attorneys. This can be accomplished through attending regional or national conferences. This type of relationship can be expanded through conference calls, video conferencing or working groups or other subsets of the group. The important point is to build trust and confidence in your leadership ability and work ethic by providing excellence in your bar activities. One good way to build a national network of contacts is for you to refer business out to colleagues you meet in bar activities. As you have the opportunity to send business to others you meet in the Section, you likely will see an increase in the number of referrals that come in. When the referral does come to you, ensure that you follow up with a personal thank you note.

One of the major obstacles to effective networking is the fact that it is time consuming. It often takes a commitment of years to build a mature network of contacts. Some research suggests it may take up to six years to see significant results in your day-to-day practice. Young lawyers, however, must make the commitment to start building the network early. If young lawyers become actively involved in bar activities and other networking opportunities early in their career, by the time they reach partnership, or consideration for partnership, they should be able to point to the dividends and potential dividends from the network that they have spent years building.

Cost is another obstacle to effective national networking. It is important for a young lawyer to discuss with his or her mentors the importance of networking. If you develop a detailed plan with the goals and objectives clearly defined, a partner has a roadmap of what you are trying to accomplish and milestones to gauge your success. Rather than viewing a bar trip as a boondoggle, the partner can see a detailed plan to bring more business to the firm. By showing opportunities to publish articles, work with industry leaders, and speak on national panels, a young lawyer may be able to persuade the firm to pay for these activities. It is important,
however, that the young lawyer then maximizes these opportunities by working hard and building opportunities to be credentialed, so he or she can show his or her firm the benefit for the cost.

Networking is the very foundation of all business development activities. As a business development tool, it requires maintaining regular contact with people for the ultimate purpose of developing business. Effective networking involves defining possible contacts, determining your networking purpose, developing a plan of action, and committing the time and energy necessary to produce meaningful results. For a young lawyer, commence your networking activities by taking one action each day to initiate and maintain a business relationship. This may involve a note to a contact you saw at lunch or forwarding an article on a new area of law to a colleague facing the issue. By constantly reaching out and nurturing existing relationships and establishing new professional relationships, you will position yourself in a stream of opportunities, resources, information and contacts that will pay dividends for years to come.