

## **Networking Tips For Young Lawyers**

Law students are typically trained to analyze facts, research applicable law, figure out options and advise clients accordingly. They graduate and become young lawyers where they apply what they learned and hone their skills in whatever specialty they choose. As the practice of law has become more of a business, however, it has become critical for lawyers to build relationships and develop good contacts. To stand out and advance, it is no longer sufficient to simply be competent. Young lawyers are expected to bring in business, or at least show the potential to do so. I have compiled some tips and reminders that I have learned over the years that will help young attorneys build those relationships early on.

### **1. You Make Your Money With Relationships.**

A former boss once told me, “We make our money with words.” That is partially true – we also make our money with relationships and the trust that builds the relationship. Clients give work to attorneys they trust. Attorneys refer work to attorneys they trust. Partners give work to associates they trust. Law firms hire associates they trust. You get the idea. So, where do you meet all these people with whom to start a long relationship? Think of yourself as your own business. In order to survive, you will need to attract customers and sell your services to somebody. Just like a business needs to devote resources to marketing, you will need to devote resources to marketing your services as well.

### **2. Use Networking Events.**

One way to market yourself is to literally put yourself in front of your own colleagues at networking events. There are many events available for young attorneys to build contacts. Whether the event focuses on a particular industry, practice area, or a geographic location, the event is an opportunity to meet a future client, referral source or even employer. Also, it does

not have to be a bar association event. I consider participation in book clubs, softball teams, and other social groups to be networking at “events.” There are also events that are geared towards networking for junior and midlevel professionals. As those younger professionals advance in their careers, they will one day be decision makers just like you.

Of course, once you go to a networking event, you will need to actually do something productive while there. It is perfectly fine to chat with people that you know, but if you spend the entire event with only people you know and have not met anybody new, then the event is a wasted opportunity. So, say hello to your friend but find some other time to catch up with her. Instead, try to meet a few people you have never met before. Study the attendee list and try to find some folks you need to meet. Take plenty of business cards and jot down some notes on the card, or discreetly email yourself some notes, to help you remember what you talked about.

### **3. What Do I Say To People?**

Networking events can be awkward, especially if you don’t know anyone. Law students are not necessarily trained to engage in small talk and some might say they are trained to compete with each other. However, when your business depends upon your relationships and being well-known, that may be the motivation you need to overlook the initial awkwardness. So, work on that “elevator pitch.” If you can’t explain what you do, confidently, in 30 seconds, keep practicing—in the shower, on the way to work, or in an actual elevator by yourself. The more you use it, the less it will feel awkward to meet new people.

If you are shy about meeting new people, perhaps it may help to think of the networking event as a learning opportunity. For instance, if there is a panel discussion, listen closely and try to meet one of the panelists and ask some follow up questions. Or, if you read an article and the

author is in the room, try to meet her and ask about her article. I have found that these folks appreciate the connection with the audience and are more than happy to speak for a few minutes.

#### **4. Follow Up.**

Let's say you go to a networking event and for three hours you charm everybody in the room. All that great work may go for naught if you don't follow up with an email or phone call shortly after the event. Offer to treat your new referral source to lunch. If she is unavailable, then offer to treat her to breakfast or coffee or a drink after work. There are many possible times for you two to meet.

So let's say you never connect and many weeks or months pass. Picking up the phone and calling this person after six months may seem awkward, because it is. If you are looking for a way to start a conversation, reading an article and forwarding it to your contact may help. Similarly, if you see some recent news about her law firm, that is another good conversation starter. These techniques will keep you on her radar and will also indicate that you were actually listening and remembered what she told you when you first met.

#### **5. Be a Connector.**

Too often young lawyers think of themselves as "silos" of information. These silos grow taller and taller, as the young lawyer gains more experience, alongside other silos. However, it is important to get a general understanding of what these other silos have to offer, especially if you work at a large law firm. It is very rare that you will meet someone who has needs that squarely fit your skill set. Instead of simply shaking hands and walking away, introduce her to someone who can help her—your own colleagues, someone in your firm, a friend of yours or even someone else you just met. Your new contact will appreciate that you are trying to help them.

Similarly, your colleagues will remember that you thought about them, which greatly increases the chance that they return the favor.

**6. Don't Forget Your Current Friends and Family.**

Many young lawyers forget that they already have a network of friends and family who could be great referral sources. These existing relationships need to be grown and maintained just like the new ones that are made throughout your career. Keep those within your inner circle aware of your expertise, and perhaps Aunt Jennie will think of you when her neighbor, CEO of Widgets R Us, needs a lawyer.

**7. Remember Your Adversaries, Too.**

Okay, so you don't like going to networking events because you don't like to be in a room full of dozens of people who are looking for business just like you. What do you do then to build contacts? One thing you can do is treat each opposing counsel as a potential contact. I have learned that adversaries can be great connectors and referral sources. After the deal is done, meet with your adversary over lunch or coffee. If you were a competent and professional adversary, it will be remembered and you may get some conflicts work out of it.

**8. Be Competent And Professional.**

I said earlier that it is not enough to be competent, but it will be difficult to build contacts if you have a bad reputation. Nobody will trust you if you are known for doing poor work. Similarly, if you are known for not returning phone calls, missing deadlines or simply being an irrational jerk, you will limit future referrals or job opportunities.

**9. It's Non-Billable. So What?**

After a stressful day dealing with nasty adversaries, demanding clients and fast-approaching deadlines, it is difficult to make time for anything that is not billable. You will need

to remember, however, that networking brings along great long term benefits to your career that makes it well worth the effort. Those extra few hours per week you spend having lunch with contacts, attending a networking event or writing an article (another effective way to get your name out) will over time lead to a robust set of contacts. Remember, you are your own business. Nobody will be looking to grow that business except you.

**10. Focus on the Long Term.**

Finally, try not to get frustrated if none of this works immediately. The goal is not to hunt for business; the goal is to plant seeds that will eventually grow into long-lasting relationships. The person you meet at Wednesday's networking event probably will not help you on Thursday, but the connection may lead to something big a year from now.

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