

'Tis the Season: Network Like a Pro!

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While most of our blog posts address issues that affect firms and even the broader profession, we thought it might be useful to offer several posts this month and next on individual business development strategies. This is the time of year when lawyers are doing a lot of networking, having a lot of client contact (of both a good and bad nature,) and thinking about how to grow their practices in 2014. We hope our November and December posts help you and your colleagues with these personal efforts.

With holiday season upon us, invitations to events have already started coming in. Events may be hosted by your referral sources, vendors, alumni associations, or even your own firm, to say nothing of your personal network. Many of these events will seem more like obligations than anything else, but remember that it takes as many as ten or fifteen active contacts for you to land just one new client. What better time to start perfecting your networking skills and focus on how to advance contacts to leads than this holiday season.

Prepare in advance.

The more you think about an event in advance, the easier it becomes to work the room once you are there. There are a number of steps you should take prior to attending large events:

1. Remember that it is better to give than to receive. This is especially true in networking. The best networkers find ways to help and make connection for others before helping themselves.
2. Set a goal for yourself – is there a business objective you want to achieve at this event?
3. Find out who will be attending; request a registration list in advance if one exists and can be shared publicly.
4. Call a few clients or contacts in advance and ask if they are going or would like to join you. If they do attend, ask them to introduce you to one or two of their contacts or to someone you want to meet who they know.
5. Prepare some ice-breaker openers. These can be questions or comments about the event topics or current events. Read the paper that day and focus on a few news items that might be of relevance to people attending the event.
6. Practice your 15-second elevator speech. Be prepared with an interesting self-introduction, focusing not on your title and practice but on what benefits and solutions you offer clients and colleagues. Make it interesting by tying what you do to a recent news story or current event.
7. Bring plenty of business cards and a pen. Have business cards easily accessible (women – be sure to wear clothing with an internal or external pocket and an easy place to put your name tag!)

Once you arrive, work the event!

1. When you arrive at the event, if there is a registration table, look at the name badges on the table. Is there someone specific you want to meet or reconnect with? Ask the host to let you know when that person arrives.
2. Find the hosts and sponsors of the event and introduce yourself. Thank them for inviting you.
3. Acknowledge people you see. Don't turn away from or walk by someone without saying hello, especially if you have met them before.
4. Don't interact only with people you know, and especially not others lawyers from your firm! If you do go with or meet up with someone you know, only stay with them long enough to catch up and introduce them or be introduced to someone else. Branch out and look for someone standing alone, or someone you know who is with a group and can introduce you to others.
5. If you are speaking with someone you just met or knew before, introduce others as they approach your group. Never stand alone or sit at a partially filled table. Take initiative to go up to individuals or groups.
6. Remember names. When you are being introduced to someone, listen carefully and try to associate the person's name with something or someone else that will help you remember him or her.
7. Body language will convey a lot. You should look friendly and welcoming, your arms should be comfortably at your side, smile, make and maintain eye contact and give someone a good, firm hand-shake.
8. Become an active and avid listener. Don't interrupt or try to convince others of all you know. Instead, focus on the other person. Be genuine. Listen for things you have in common. People like to talk about themselves so let them!
9. Quality not quantity is the goal. Don't hand out your card without first connecting with the person. When you receive a business card, pause to look at it and see if there is anything that generates further discussion. Jot a note on the back to remind you later of a highlight of your conversation.
10. Don't spend too much time with any one individual at a networking event, even if you have found much in common to discuss. Suggest a specific follow-up activity such as lunch or a phone call and a date and then move on. Others will expect you to be moving around to say hello to others. Just remember to say good-bye to each person in a group before moving on.

Follow-up immediately.

The value of networking at events is quickly lost if you don't take steps to connect with each person you met as soon as you return to the office. Just as it takes ten to fifteen contacts to land each client, it will take multiple touch points to convert acquaintances into more valuable relationships. While communicating with individuals in the first forty-eight hours is best, you can still do so for up to a week, perhaps two. (After that, it becomes awkward to be back in touch with someone you only met at that particular function.)

Effective follow-up requires the following steps:

1. Send those you met or saw again an e-mail. Attach your VCard for easy download onto their contact data base.
2. Give the business cards to your assistant to be sure the full contact information is entered into your contact data base. You might consider creating a second category (the first category should be the ones you use normally, e.g., client, prospect, industry, title/role) that enables you to sort your list by the even at which you met the person to help jog your memory.
3. For those contacts with whom you made a good connection, suggest a follow-up lunch to get together.

4. Look to see if they are on LinkedIn and send an invitation to connect.

A Few Final Tips.

- Remember to network with family members and friends. Share your business development goals and targets, explore with them who they know and see how they can help you.
- Know who you know and know who you owe. Keep and update a good contact list. Add new names to your list with notes about where you met the person and the flow of your conversation.
- Stay in touch on at least a quarterly basis. Find a reason to communicate with those in your network.
- Keep a contact log beside your phone at all times. Call, e-mail or send an article to 1 contact per day, or 5 per week. Keep a record of your correspondence with each contact.
- Be helpful. Continue to look for ways to provide value to your contacts.
- Be generous. Share your ideas, resources and support.
- Just do it! Interacting with people you don't know can be uncomfortable. Be open to making new connections, learning new things. Venture outside your comfort zone.
- Have fun! Enjoy new connections and opportunities.

Happy holidaying!

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