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Building a Practice: Strategic Networking

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Networking is the most important business development activity for lawyers. Why? Because the basis of all client relationships is trust. Trust develops over time as individuals get to know each other, understand each other's strengths, and build personal relationships. (The getting-to-know someone process works best when it occurs both in person and online.)



At its most basic level, networking consists of online and in-person activities that create environments in which strangers can build trust as they get to know each other through the give and take of ideas, discovery of common interests, exchange of business leads or introductions, and offers of mutual assistance.

Networking Strategically

Strategic networking moves networking to a more sophisticated level by adding the idea of "process" and "intention." Just being in a room full of people doesn't necessarily mean you are implementing strategic networking.

Strategic networking requires you to adopt a set of specific goals and design a series of activities that will introduce you to people who are in a position to help you reach these goals. Key steps include:

- the identification of a specific target: a kind of client, a situation requiring a specific legal remedy, or an area of legal practice;
- the creation of a "target persona" embodying specific attributes of the target to help you understand her/his motivations, interests, needs, and situation;
- an understanding of where someone fitting this target persona goes, with whom she/he networks, what she/he reads, etc.; and
- a plan to join the groups where you can meet either the ideal target or people who can refer you to the target.

Key Attributes of Strategic Networkers

Attitude. Successful networking is more about attitude than aptitude. The best networkers are curious about other people. They are good listeners who ask probing questions, really want to understand what other people need, and constantly think about connections. They are usually surrounded by people interested in what they have to say.

- They know that "it is better to give than receive" because "what goes around comes around."
- They believe that you have two ears and one mouth so you can listen twice as much as you speak.
- They think it is better to be interested than interesting.

These networkers are themselves sources of referrals—they are connectors who sit at the top of the networking pyramid.

Body language. 93% of what we communicate is nonverbal: 55% visual, 38% vocal (tone), and 7% language itself. Our minds create a first visual impression of other people in three to five seconds. The first impression becomes the foundation of our image. We prefer to put whatever else we subsequently learn about a person within that first image.

Visual primacy. People lie but bodies don't. Being able to read body language gives you an advantage in interpersonal situations. It helps you to sense the questions and concerns behind other people's spoken words. When you enter a room, the way in which you hold yourself, move, sit, and participate creates a perception of you that is more authentic and believable than anything you say.

- When you enter a room, stand tall and walk briskly with your head up and a pleasant expression on your face to give an impression of authority and confidence.
- When you engage in discussion, maintain eye contact, lean in, and nod or tilt your head to signal that you are engaged.
- Shaking hands is an important networking first step. When you shake hands, smile, make eye contact, and match the strength of the other person's handshake. Unless they give you the "fish slide shake." This slight handshake used to be a sign of female decorum, but today it conveys a sense of insecurity or unease.

Verbal choices. The importance of body language does not diminish your need to be intentional in how you organize and phrase what you actually have to say.

- People tend to give more weight to the beginning of a conversation, so begin with your main points.
- Positive language (strong adjectives, action verbs, present tense) suggest that you are a doer—a positive, decisive person.

Appearance. To present yourself as you want to be seen, pay attention to your clothing and dress for the image you want others to see when they look at you. Despite the casual dress in some industries, people tend to expect lawyers to wear business attire in business-oriented settings such as networking groups.

Presentation and follow-through. When making networking connections, people tend to assume that the behavior you exhibit there is indicative of your behavior were they to hire you.

- If your conversation sounds thoughtful and knowledgeable, they will assume that you are similarly prepared and knowledgeable about your work.
- If you show an interest in them, their issues, and their interests during networking conversations, they assume you will be attentive and client-focused should they become a client.
- If you promise them something during your conversation and forget to follow through fairly promptly, they will assume unresponsiveness should they hire you.

Preparing Strategically

You always sound more focused, more professional, and more in control if you plan ahead. After you have identified and defined your networking target and written out your strategic goals, you need to think about the language you want to use to reinforce your brand, which is the essence of your image as seen through the eyes of others. Two important preparations are your value statement and your elevator pitch.

Value statement. Your value statement is the value clients will perceive when they work with you. It includes intangibles, such as responsiveness and empathy, and tangible output, such as work product and results. Being able to express the value you want clients

to see helps you to set their expectations about you.

Elevator pitch. All too often, elevator pitches are boring recitations of who you are, where you work, and what you do. Your elevator pitch *should be* an invitation to begin a conversation focused on the benefits of what you do and how you do it. Instead of saying “I am a trusts and estates lawyer,” say, “I help people think about their future and decide how they want their assets apportioned after they die.” Someone hearing the latter would be more likely to ask follow-up questions. Before a networking meeting, think about how your clients benefit from your expertise and how you can showcase your benefits in a memorable way.

Also spend some time thinking about who will be at the meeting and what you might like to learn from them or about them. And think about what you can contribute to the conversation. Finally, define what meeting outcome would be a success for you.

By preparing ahead of time, your conversation will be more focused and your questions more interesting. You will be demonstrating the type of professional you want them to see.

Strategically Choosing Your Environment

To develop the strong, trusted relationships that will fuel your success, you need to network in environments that are comfortable for you. Many professionals recoil at the thought of entering a room full of strangers and trying to turn them into friends. It reminds them of evenings at freshman college mixers spent sitting on the sidelines. Rest assured, these situations represent only one type of networking—and you should actually avoid them if they make you uncomfortable.

Why? Because the fundamental precondition for successful networking is to present your authentic self: who you are, what you do, and why you do it. This is essential to building trust. If you are in an uncomfortable environment, you will come across as awkward or uneasy. There will be a visual disconnect between your uncomfortable body language and your prepared elevator speech. Your audience will interpret your psychological unease negatively and see you as insincere.

If you are not comfortable in large networking settings, try joining local networking groups that have regular in-person meetings. Ask someone you know who is a member to go with you and make initial introductions. After the meeting, make plans for one-on-one coffees with several of the group members. The size of the group and your friendship-building initiatives will turn these networking activities into comfortable occasions.

Another approach is to ask a friend to join you for a four-way breakfast or lunch at which each of you brings someone you think the other person would like to meet. The meal should be comfortable because one person is already a friend and each of you can guide the new people into useful, relevant conversations.

Whatever networking options you choose, remember that the goal is to present your best, most memorable, and authentic self—and build the trusted relationships that will fuel your law firm's growth.

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