



GETTING STARTED: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

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When newly minted or young lawyers seek advice on rainmaking from seasoned attorneys, the response is usually “you need to network and build relationships” and/or “you need to be ‘out there.’” Unfortunately, that is often insufficient information. Those who offer the advice feel it is self-explanatory. For millennials raised in a digital world, where relationships are often built and sustained without face-to-face contact, much gets lost in translation.

I frequently ask associates to describe their “networking” experiences. A typical scenario will have a number of associates at a firm who are encouraged (ordered? pressured?) to attend a bar association event. The attorneys from the firm huddle together. Only occasionally does one briefly interact with someone they know from school, a case or a former firm. And they usually fail to introduce that person to others from the firm. None are really sure what they’re supposed to accomplish. And not surprisingly, they often accomplish nothing other than to conclude that the event was a waste of time.

Not surprising is the fact that when placed in a room with a group of prospective clients they don’t know, they react like deer in the headlights. They underwhelm with a scant superficial conversation, or overcompensate by boldly offering their legal services, which is a turnoff to the prospective client.

What is not clear is how to go about building relationships that become beneficial. In order to invest the time and energy in learning to do it well, an attorney has to believe that it is a necessary skill for success. So let me be clear on this point. In today’s marketplace, where so much work is commoditized, and competition is intense, strong relationships make the difference between filling one’s plate with sustaining work or going hungry. It’s just that simple.

Communication experts say that one has no more than four minutes at most to draw someone into a meaningful conversation. I think that’s way too optimistic. Realistically, you probably only have two minutes to engage someone in conversation before they extricate themselves due to lack of interest.

With that in mind, it is wise to do some mental preparation for any event one will attend. Whether it is a social gathering, a bar event, a charitable event or something else, think in advance about the people you will encounter.

Arm yourself with ready-made suitable questions. People like to talk about themselves. Your goal is to have pleasant conversations with people and get to know about them. Ask open-ended questions that will elicit more than a simple yes or no answer. Listen actively for something that provides for additional interesting exploration. (Email lawpractice@pabar.org for a copy of “Breaking the Ice” which provides additional guidance.)

A very positive outcome will be one in which you have had a pleasant conversation, and 1) discover enough about the person to know some challenge they may be facing, personally or professionally, or 2) find a point of common interest.

In the first instance, seize the opportunity to be of assistance if you can. Not for quid pro quo; just to be helpful. For example, in the conversation you learn that the person recently lost her babysitter and hasn't had a date night with her spouse in a while. It's easy to empathize with that situation. If you know of or can find a good service, follow up with a call to give the person contact information. That kindness will make a significant impression.

In the second instance, if you find out, for example, that you have a common interest in golf, it's easy to follow-up with an invitation to a round at your favorite course or to team up at a bar golf outing.

Repeated contact in which you gain increasing knowledge about the other person and are genuine in your attention and helpfulness will provide additional opportunities to identify other needs and personal and professional concerns the person has. Depending on what gets revealed, you will be able to tell stories which illustrate your savvy in meaningful areas and your ability to produce results. Don't hesitate to make meaningful introductions. It takes time to build trust. Concentrate on the relationship, not on the opportunity to put your hand out for work. Keep in mind that coming on too strong too early will make your efforts at empathy seem hollow and self-serving.

Keep in mind that a lot of your interaction with people will probably be accomplished by simple exchanges through email, text, phone, mail, or social media. Nowadays face-to-face contact is far less frequent than digital exchange. Our lives are too frantic to allow the luxury of meeting with all the people we want in person. But that doesn't mean it can't be done successfully.

Another thing to keep in mind is that your goal in networking is to get to know people in many different spheres of influence. That includes areas you're



passionate about. If there is a particular charity, sport, or social cause that you're involved in, then get to really know the people around you. And let them know the kind of person you are and what skills you bring to the table. There are no “bad” networks of people. All can produce results when you build solid relationships.

Remember, though, that whatever you do, you will make an impression. It is far better to be known as the person who is a great coach, than the person who is rowdiest at the sporting event. If you volunteer to do something, put in the effort to do it as well as possible. People will respect that and conclude that you conduct yourself that way professionally.

The vast majority of new clients and referral sources are built upon solid relationships. You hear most successful rainmakers talk about their book of business in terms of the client relationships they've painstakingly developed. They start with a conversation — personal or digital— that begins the process of turning a stranger into a friend or friendly acquaintance, and ultimately into a client or referral source.

A term frequently used by marketing consultants is “touch.” What is a touch? It is a term which refers to one of the many opportunities you can create in which you and the prospect intersect paths. Examples of touches include some of the following:

- Prospect attends a seminar at which you present
- Prospect reads something you've written
- Prospect meets you personally at social, political, charitable, educational, sporting, industry or other event
- Prospect is given your name from a trusted referral source
- You reach out to prospect with a helpful article, website link, comment on their LinkedIn post, etc.

In the simplest terms, you build a relationship from scratch by carefully orchestrating a series of touches. The most significant touches will result from planning.

One final thought you need to keep in mind can be summed up in one word: resilience. Lawyers rate far below the average population on this personality characteristic. In other words, lawyers don't react well to rejection. Look in the



mirror and repeat after me, “No doesn’t mean never, it means not now!” If you get no for an answer when you ask for work, (or offer to help), that doesn’t mean you’re done. It means you continue to develop the relationship and ask again at a future date.

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