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## Networking Effectively & Ethically

By Roy S. Ginsburg

Everyone knows that, much like diet and exercise, networking is good for you and that there are lots of excuses for avoiding it. Practicing lawyers confronting the need to “get out there and network!” find it engenders powerful attitudinal obstacles. But unless you tap networking as a business development tool you will consistently fall short of your potential.

### Understanding Networking

Almost anyone can learn to network comfortably and achieving that comfort depends first on understanding what networking is *not*. Networking is *not* showing up at a conference or reception, glad-handing and distributing business cards to strangers. Who wouldn't feel uncomfortable doing that?

Networking *is* building a network of people for the purpose of mutual assistance.

Put the emphasis on *mutual*. It's not “I want your legal business.” Rather, it's “How can we help one another in professional, as well as personal, ways?” In its simplest form, networking presents a platform for exchanging information that is mutually beneficial. It may be about a legal matter, but it could even be about a baby sitter or plumber if the need is expressed.

Further, and this is key to building a network, it's more about giving than receiving. Only when you give (advice, praise, recommendations, etc.) do relationships grow and develop. Once that occurs, it's only a matter of time before you get something back. It's human nature; people like to reciprocate. Developing trusting and dependable relationships, however, doesn't happen in one meeting. It is a process, and it requires persistence and patience to reap the benefits.

### Getting Past the Excuses

Many lawyers resist incorporating networking as a means of building a book of

business. Here are their most common excuses:

- I don't have the time.
- I'm a professional; networking is like being a salesperson.
- It is outside my comfort zone.

These attitudes stand in the way of networking progress. Let's consider them one by one.

**I don't have the time.** Once you understand what a well-developed network can accomplish, it can actually save you time. For instance, everyone who is part of your network is a potential resource, with access to information, opportunities, or ideas that could otherwise require hours of your time to gather. With an established network, the answer to a practice management issue is only a phone call or two away. But the main reason lawyers should network is that having an effective network is one of the most critical components of being a successful rainmaker. As such, taking the time to network must be a priority.

Think about the successful lawyers you know. Are they the most exceptionally skilled or technically competent legal professionals? If not, then what is it that sets them apart and sparks their success? Undoubtedly, it's the number of people they know and the quality of the relationships they have with them. Building meaningful relationships, over time, is the key to a robust practice; and effective networking is the genesis for developing those relationships.

**I'm not a salesperson.** Don't confuse networking with a sales call. Remember, networking is about sharing information and listening for ways to be of mutual assistance.

Letting people you meet know that you practice law in a firm that offers a range of services is *information*, not *sales*. Lawyers need to shift their attitude if they think that networking is the same as "selling" legal services. Most people are grateful to know where to find a lawyer when they need advice about estate planning, protecting a company's intellectual property, completing a business transaction, or trying to keep someone out of jail. And all lawyers can be proud of the fact that they earn their living by helping people.

**It's out of my comfort zone.** Just as networking is not handing out business cards at receptions, it is also not cold-calling complete strangers. Rather, think of it as developing relationships with people with whom you may be acquainted, but would like to know better.

Is a cup of coffee or lunch out of your comfort zone? Rarely have I worked with an attorney who could not carry on a pleasant conversation in a one-on-one setting.

Start with people you already know, professionally or personally, to create a contact list. Think about people who can benefit from an enhanced relationship with you. Here's a starter list of prospects:

- Law firm (cross-sell)
- Clients
- People from bar association or trade/industry organizations
- People from organizations where you volunteer
- Opposing counsel from past cases
- Extended family members
- Friends (and their friends)
- Neighbors (do you ever wonder what to talk about at the annual block party?)
- People with whom you went to college or law school
- People from previous jobs
- Members of your church or synagogue

Next, prioritize the list and contact these people to set up a casual get-together. Connect with a college alum who is starting a new business or another lawyer who could be a good referral source.

Not everyone will accept your outreach, so don't take it personally. They are either too busy or are too shortsighted to see the benefits of networking. Remember that 70 percent of the time, the best baseball players don't make it to first base when they come to the plate. If you can enhance your relationship with 25 percent of those on the contact list, you're doing fine.

Building a network is a numbers game. It's not about having the best personality or leading the popularity chart. To be successful at it, you must continuously circulate, adding new names to your contact list. Build your network within groups where prospective clients or referral sources are likely to be found. Attend conferences, become visibly active in professional and community organizations where you interact with many people, or join a committee where you can meet and build rapport with a smaller group. Networking doesn't happen in your office: Get out and meet someone new.

### **Practical Tips**

Here are some general tips to make those networking efforts more effective:

**1. Network systematically.** Make a contract with yourself that you will spend a certain amount of time networking. For example, your contract could be a commitment to have a certain number of coffees, lunches, or association gatherings per month. Keep the commitment realistic. If you set your sights too high, you'll likely get frustrated and stop all of your efforts. The goal is eventually to make networking a seamless habit.

**2. Listen.** Remember the ears-to-mouth ratio. You have two ears and one mouth. Spend at least twice as much time listening as talking. If you don't listen, you will not learn how you can help this person.

**3. Follow up** with regular communication and thoughtful gestures. Email your contacts an article they might find interesting, send a card when their child graduates from college or a plant on their birthday, or make a date for lunch again later in the year.

**4. Be enthusiastic.** Few people hire lawyers who don't enjoy what they do. When I was an inhouse attorney, I wanted lawyers who truly loved what they did. I was once involved in a 1st Amendment case and was seeking counsel. I obtained three referrals. On paper, they all had the necessary credentials and experience. I then interviewed all three. One lawyer in particular simply exuded passion for the 1st Amendment when we talked. Guess which one I hired?

**5. Be confident, not arrogant.** Many lawyers find it difficult to strike the proper balance between these two. Everyone wants to hire the lawyer who sounds like she knows what she's doing. Unfortunately, in trying to project confidence, many lawyers "cross the line," boasting about themselves or their law firm. When I've encountered these I was never impressed, but I was always incredibly bored.

**6. Be patient.** How many people do you know who got married after only one date? Then why expect to be hired after one lunch? Remember, networking is a process of building relationships. It may take years of staying in contact before you are retained.

### **The ROI**

A well-worn cliché reminds us, "it's not *what* you know that counts, it's *who* you know." Well, in the legal profession, we know for sure that *what* you know is of primary importance. But it doesn't do much good if others don't know you know it.

Investing the time to develop a wide network of informational resources, advisors, and prospects yields a return that exponentially increases over the years. And that's because just about all the contacts you make, at some point in their personal or professional lives, will need legal services. Wouldn't it be great if you popped into their minds? Networking effectively will assure that outcome.

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## **Ethics & Networking**

While there are no specific ethics rules that have the word "networking" in them, a key goal of networking—business development—is addressed directly.

Rule 7.3 of the Minnesota Rules of Professional Conduct states that lawyers cannot “solicit professional employment from a prospective client” in person or by telephone unless that person is a lawyer or has a “family, close personal, or prior professional relationship with the lawyer.”

This rule is commonly misunderstood. Keep in mind that:

1. The rule applies in any room in any type of building, not only hospital emergency rooms.
2. There is no exception in the rule for soliciting a “sophisticated client,” *e.g.*, a corporate executive whose company is being sued. Calling the CEO and asking to be considered as defense counsel is unethical unless the CEO falls within the exceptions noted above.
3. The rule contains no consent exception for referrals. If one of your contacts calls and asks you to call a friend who needs legal assistance, you cannot presume that the friend has consented to be contacted. Thank your contact for the referral, but urge that they have their friend call you directly; if you initiate the call you could be disciplined.

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