

Networking: what it is and why it matters

By Emily Morrow



RECENTLY I SPOKE AT A gathering of lawyers on the topic of influencing and its importance in building and running a successful law practice.

A member of the audience asked how influencing tied in with successful networking to create a high profile practice. It got me thinking about what networking is and why it's so important for lawyers. Hence, this article.

Since the global financial crisis, many lawyers tell me the market for legal services has become more competitive. They are working harder to get new instructions, both from existing or new clients or referral sources. Not surprisingly, lawyers want to focus on their business development capabilities; what should they be doing and how can they maximise the return on investment for their efforts?

Networking and practice development – optional or essential?

In my experience, networking needs to be an important component of *any* lawyer's business development strategy.

It's low cost, high return, easily done and endless in its possibilities. It can be done very appropriately without in any way "diluting" one's "brand" as a professional. In today's competitive legal market, in which legal services are increasingly becoming commoditised, effective networking is, I believe, an essential component of differentiating oneself and one's work from other lawyers. It's no longer just a helpful thing to do; it's a mission-critical skill.

Interestingly (but perhaps not surprisingly), many lawyers tell me they are not entirely comfortable with their networking capabilities. They believe they do not take full advantage of the professional opportunities that optimal networking might generate.

Why is this? Why do otherwise exceedingly bright, capable and self-confident lawyers fail to develop professional networks that will build their practices? What holds them back?

No doubt none of us learned how to

network while studying law, and that is perhaps one reason. Another, more subtle, but yet significant reason is that many lawyers, in their own minds, have some negative associations with the concept of networking.

When working with clients, I invariably discuss networking as an important capability for successful business development. I often say: "Tell me what networking means to you".

The answers are interesting. One said: "I know I should network, but it feels like manipulating other people and that makes me uncomfortable". Another responded: "It's about getting to know other people, but after I've done that, I don't know what to do next".

Others have said they believe "what you know" is more important than "who you know", that networking is therefore somewhat "unprofessional" and that they are philosophically uncomfortable with the idea of networking. Predictably, these clients were anxious about their ability to network successfully or even downright resistant to the idea of networking.

Networking – giving, not getting

For those who are anxious about their capability to network, I find that, fortunately, networking is a skill (like any technical skill in the law) that can be learned and perfected with focus and practice.

For those who perceive networking to be unprofessional (and are even somewhat philosophically opposed to it), considering a different conceptual approach to what it is and how to engage in it may be helpful. If, in fact, effective networking is a non-negotiable component of building a successful practice today, then developing at least some comfort with the process could be a real benefit for any lawyer.

When I think about networking three things come to mind. They are relationship building, giving and Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*.

Starting with the last first, Gladwell discusses the midnight ride of Paul Revere and why it successfully mobilised American resistance during the Revolutionary War. Paul

Revere was the quintessential "connector" (he knew everyone), "maven" (he knew a lot about everything) and "salesman" (he knew how to promote anything). He was a consummate networker. It wasn't about him; it was about using his networking skills to accomplish something important for his community. I expect he never asked for thanks. Giving to his community was all the recognition he wanted or needed.

If one perceives networking as an opportunity to "give" to others within one's community, as opposed to focusing on "getting" from others, it can make the process a more appealing one.

Accordingly, building a high functioning network depends on both "what you know" as well as "who you know". Having one without the other is real non-starter. You can't give to others unless you get to know them and what matters to them.

To be honest, I love to network; I'm a natural at it. Put me anywhere in the world and, like a cat landing solidly on all four feet, I'll instinctively begin networking. It's the relationship building and the giving that I find irresistible. I'm also a relatively extroverted person, so interacting with other people is an intrinsically enjoyable and energising experience for me.

Everyone you meet has a unique perspective and I'm endlessly interested in learning about that. In the process, I gather information and I remember it. This is where the giving piece comes in. Invariably, later on I find such information could be helpful to another person. Then really remarkable things can start happening. I might suggest ways to connect the dots so the other person has new options. I don't tell others what to do, but instead act as a catalyst by connecting people with possible opportunities. It's their choice to act on those or not.

That said, I have also noticed that people who are more introverted can find networking more difficult, particularly in larger group settings where they don't know a lot of people. For these people, it may be helpful to focus on relationship building and networking opportunities in smaller groups or on a one-on-one basis. That said, some people who have a natural preference for introversion

will nevertheless intentionally choose to engage in more extroverted behaviour and can be quite successful in doing so.

Jeanne, the novice networker

I met with Jeanne when she was being considered by her firm for advancement to partnership.

She was clearly a very bright, capable lawyer but came across as being quiet, somewhat hesitant and perhaps even a bit shy when we first met. Jeanne said she knew that networking would be important in developing her practice and ultimately becoming a partner, but admitted she was really uncomfortable with the idea of networking.

It became clear to me that Jeanne's conceptual resistance to networking was, in fact, based in large part on her lack of confidence about her networking skills. Gradually, she acknowledged that to some extent her philosophical resistance was a rationalisation for her low confidence level.

With this in mind, we identified some opportunities for Jeanne to engage in networking in ways that would be relatively easy for her. She decided to ask other lawyers in her firm to give her a few introductions to people they knew. In this way, she was able to pursue one-on-one "warm contacts" relatively easily.

To her surprise, she found she really enjoyed following up on these and had some very interesting discussions. This gave her the confidence to contact some other people without introductions. Jeanne then next decided to schedule a small luncheon meeting at her firm and invited a few people to attend. Again, she found this to be an intrinsically enjoyable experience.

Interestingly, as Jeanne's comfort level around her networking capabilities increased, her conceptual resistance to the idea of networking correspondingly decreased. She was developing her own, highly personalised approach to the process, and it was working well for her.

Enhancing your networking skills

If you'd like to enhance your networking skills, consider the following:

- Articulate why networking is important for you, what you intend to accomplish and what success will look like if you achieve your goals.
- Identify whom you'd like to meet and how to do that. Will you contact individuals directly, show up at a function where you might encounter them by chance, ask

someone else to introduce you or what? The choice will depend on what makes you comfortable. I find extroverts are often more likely to "cold call", whereas introverts prefer introductions. No one size fits all.

- When you meet someone you'd like to get to know better, show a genuine interest and practise active listening. As the other tells you about him/herself, suspend your thinking, listen to the other fully, allow a brief pause when the other finishes and then respond. The most charming person is the best listener. If you listen actively, you will be memorable in a positive way.
- Consider the significance of what the other is telling you. What is particularly salient, what has the broadest implications, what will be relevant to you and others? Remember that information and jettison the rest. Your memory is limited.
- Keep secrets and respect personal information. Networking is not about gossiping. Be gracious and positive. Don't malign others. Stay on the "high road".
- Then go about your life like the proverbial bumble bee alighting on many flowers. Be a connector, a maven and/or a salesman. Cross pollinate when you can so the garden becomes a beautiful, rich and robust place where everyone thrives.
- Be prepared for unexpected successes and pursue them assiduously. Conversely, do not be surprised when interactions prove to be less "fruitful" than you might have hoped. In that case, nimbly change

your course, do not take it personally, and pursue new options. Be sure you always have some additional networking opportunities in mind so you can follow up on these and lose no momentum.

- Enjoy the experience and savour your successes. By focusing on giving to others and benefiting your community as a whole, what goes around will come around. Gradually (but yet predictably) you will find that this high functioning network begins to convert into new instructions that come directly to you.

It takes a while to build a high functioning network that consistently generates new business. However, if you persevere, are consistent in your efforts and continue broadening and deepening your contacts, you will be successful. You will also never regret the time, energy and creativity that you invested in the process.

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