

# Choosing Personal over Social Networking

By Matt Austin, Barnes & Thornburg

Networking at group functions, in my opinion, is extremely difficult for new lawyers. Many in the group already know each other, but you don't know anyone. You want to meet people, but don't want to intrude into a group of people already conversing, and you are leery of being blindsided by the dreaded "I've got a situation..." question if you don't know the answer. So hanging out by yourself or with others your own age seems to be where most new lawyers find themselves.

I'm writing this in the middle of January when snow is on the ground and lingering Christmas decorations still adorn rarely used portions of my house. A new year brings new hopes and new goals.

Some people decide to eat healthier. For me, that goal lasts until college football bowl season – when a dozen "must watch" games occur in the first week of January. My goal to exercise also dwindles a few weeks into the new year because it's just too cold, or too dark, or the gym is too crowded, or there are too many college football bowl games to watch, or ... you get the idea.

Law firms frequently use the beginning of the year to reflect on the past year's clients, cases, business contacts and marketing endeavors.

Well-intentioned lawyers determine ways to increase all of the above; some seek writing opportunities, or opportunities to educate others through speaking at seminars or being quoted in publications. Some lawyers join non-profit boards that provide professional exposure as well as altruistically helping a cause dear to their hearts. Many attorneys enthralled by social media have LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and other accounts that they diligently manage. Still others subscribe to the time honored tradition of networking through breakfasts, lunches, after work drinks and mingling at various trade association events.

Whether writing, speaking, joining boards, engaging in social media or mingling, the goal is the same: increase your exposure



and, via that exposure, ultimately, increase your client base. Sounds easy, right? Although the ease of achieving those goals is individual, with the right dedication and expectations, you can and will increase your client base – regardless of whether the increase is from zero clients to a handful or from several clients to so many that you need your own associates to keep up with your demand!

Young lawyers, who are overachievers by nature, frequently put the cart before the horse. Especially in today's society where we seek immediate gratification, attorneys often expect instantaneous results from networking. I created a LinkedIn profile, so I should have clients. I tweet, so I should have clients. I spoke at a trade association, so I should have clients. Unfortunately, the world of lawyering does not work that way.

Clients must be earned and networking is an art that very few have mastered. I have not mastered it, but I enjoy networking and will share what has and has not worked for me in the past.

First, your expectations must be tempered. New lawyers are by definition inexperienced, and who wants to spend money on an inexperienced attorney? Certainly not me. In fact, I don't hire inexperienced doctors, bankers or repairmen and I don't expect them to hire me.

New lawyers are also typically young, perhaps even the age of their prospective clients' children or grandchildren. And not until wrinkles adorn your face or your hair is grey (or missing) will some people find you worthy as an attorney. While your age and physical features may make landing clients more challenging, you shouldn't sit idle while other baby-faced rookies network.

Second, make personal connections with prospective clients. New lawyers are incredibly efficient at social media, and combining your Facebook friends with your LinkedIn connections and your Twitter followers, you are likely cyber-related to hundreds or thousands of people. But lawyers are not hired for our prowess at communicating in 160 characters or less. We are hired because our clients believe we are competent at what we do, and for that, potential clients must either know us personally, or trust a referral source who knows us personally.

So get out from behind the keyboard and meet people. Meet them anywhere and at any time. A very successful attorney who has mastered the art of networking told me that he sometimes has two breakfasts in the morning with two different prospective clients.

These meetings are not for you to sell yourself as a lawyer; they are to actually get to know the person behind the Internet profile. Just who is @MHJones?

Remember to temper your expectations, though. As wonderful and intelligent as you think you are, not everyone will want to meet you – some will think you're meeting to sell your legal services, others will think you're

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making romantic advances and some are just leery of actually meeting a stranger.

The people you're meeting already know you're an attorney and can easily find out that you specialize in commercial real estate. Instead of approaching a personal meeting with the goal of obtaining a client, approach the meeting with a genuine interest in learning about the person on a personal level; focus on commonalities such as friends, family, schools, churches, communities, sports and restaurants.

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People like you aren't hiring lawyers. Even if you practice DUI defense or family law, people hire their friends' recommendations over "the guy I met at the silent auction." Instead of giving up on trade association events, with the right level of expectation, these functions are fertile grounds for practicing and succeeding at networking.

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Still don't buy into networking at trade association events? Start by finding the group of insurance salesmen, bankers and tax advisers; they're present for the same reason you are and are equally as uncomfortable. Together you can all commiserate about not knowing anyone and not wanting to break into already formed cliques. By the end of the evening, you will have left with names and business cards of a handful of new potential referral sources.

Because networking events are fluid where people pop into and out of conversations, follow-up meetings are required in order to truly get to know a new contact. The easiest way to arrange that "next step" meeting is to send her an email or offer to connect with her on LinkedIn. From there, continue the genuine interest in getting to know the person and not focusing on what

legal work she can or cannot immediately shuttle your way.

One caveat to remember is that if the person you want to meet with consistently cannot meet or cancels the meeting on multiple occasions, does not offer other dates he is available or is too busy to meet for the foreseeable few weeks, that person is not interested in meeting with you. Don't take it personally, and don't be a persistent pest.

Lastly, you will be an attorney for the next few decades. Your career is a marathon, not a sprint, and with age comes wisdom, respect and confidence. Whether writing, speaking or mingling, if you want to be successful, then you want to make marketing a part of your weekly routine.

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