

10 Steps to Effective Networking

Most attorneys say that their business comes through word of mouth or referrals. How do we keep those referrals coming? How do we establish and maintain relationships with referral sources and potential clients? Through effective networking. Here are 10 steps to ensure that your networking efforts are productive.

1. Have a purpose

Set clear objectives when you attend a networking event. Is there someone in particular that you want to be sure to meet or speak with? Do you want to get known within a certain circle? Are you simply trying to determine whether a particular group is worth joining? Are you seeking information about a particular person or group? Are you trying to identify potential prospects or strategic alliances? Do you want to make one or two good connections? Having a clear objective will help you determine whether the event was worthwhile.

2. Focus on quality, not quantity

Networking isn't a race to collect the most business cards. It's about making connections. Remember: people do business with people they **know, like and trust**. Focus on meeting one or two people and establishing an initial connection, rather than just collecting a bunch of business cards. Make sure to learn something concrete about each person you meet.

3. Get involved with something you're passionate about

Networking isn't just cocktail parties and networking breakfasts. It's making lasting connections with other people that are mutually beneficial. You are more likely to participate if you're passionate about a cause or activity, and you'll create deeper connections with others in the group. Sharing experiences creates a deeper connection – and makes it more likely that you'll get business. For the holidays, volunteering at a charity event can be an opportunity to connect with others in the spirit of giving.

4. Listen

People love to talk about themselves. What people really want to know when they meet you is what you can do for them or how you can benefit them. If your goal is to meet new people and make a positive and lasting connection, make sure that you're listening much more than you are speaking. Make it about what you can do for them.

Listening allows you to find out about others' needs and address what you can do for them and how you can benefit them – whether directly through the services that you provide, or by putting them in touch with others that can help them if you can't.

Ask questions about them, their business, their problems, challenges, and desires. Bob Burg, author of the book, *Endless Referrals: Network Your Everyday Contacts*, calls these kinds of questions "feel good questions." He suggests asking questions such as:

- How did you get started in your business?
- What do you enjoy most about what you do?
- What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?
- What significant changes have occurred in your business or industry within the past several years? How have those changes affected you?
- How would you want people to describe you?
- How would I know if a certain person is a good prospect or lead for you?

5. Be prepared

Be ready to answer the question about what you do with a response that focuses on the benefits to your clients, the problems they face and the results you create, NOT on activities or on what you 'do.' Don't start your response by using labels like 'lawyer' or 'attorney' – usually labels make people stop listening and rely on their pre-conceived notions about what that label means.

6. Seek out strategic alliances

Potential clients aren't the only reason to attend networking events. You can't be all things to all people. Consider networking events as places to meet other who can provide services to your clients that are complimentary to yours, and who can become referral sources for your business. Remember that when you're networking or meeting people, you're connecting with their entire network, too.

7. Make diverse contacts

Many lawyers make the mistake of joining groups or speaking to people that are too similar to them. That creates an 'echo chamber' effect in which people are echoing back the same information and contacts to you. The goal in networking is to widen your net. Diversify.

8. Follow up

Most networking efforts fail in the follow up. Intentions aren't enough. Action is the key. Networking is about creating relationships, and real relationships can't be formed in a few minutes in a room full of people. For networking to be effective, you need to follow up with those you meet at a networking event. Some ideas:

- Send a handwritten thank you note reminding the recipient who you are, where you met and what you discussed
- Contact a new connection and suggest meeting for coffee to learn more about their business
- Send an article or information on a topic you discussed
- Introduce a prospect to someone else that can help them, personally or professionally

9. Be patient

Research shows that it can take between 7 and 9 contacts with a prospect before they make a decision to do business with you. The same is true for strategic alliances or referral sources. Don't get discouraged if business doesn't magically appear immediately.

10. Keep track of your networking contacts

Create a database or place to organize and store information about the people you meet – don't just throw a pile of business cards in a drawer. Your database should include information about where and when you met them, what they do professionally, and what their business and personal interests are. If you've done your job and learned something concrete about each person, you'll have a good start on creating meaningful contacts.