

Naturalize Your Networking Skills for Success

By Kimberly Alford Rice

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How do you measure your networking success? Does it include “whoever has the most business cards, wins?” How about “I gave out all my cards, so I must be doing something right” WRONG!

As you are out and about this Summer hanging out with friends and colleagues, don't miss the opportunity to practice and improve your networking skills. You will find through the course of your career, there are few skills as impactful as becoming an effective networker and learning the art of making successful connections.

Sure, you may be a spoke (aka associate) in a very large wheel (your law firm), but there is no substitute to cultivating strong, sustainable relationships on a one-on-one basis to build a strong, prosperous practice. It is, after all, individuals who actually retain your services. Subtract the “human element” of the connection, and there is no connection. That is why it's so important to naturalize and grow more comfortable in talking with strangers (sorry, Mom, I realize this goes against earlier teachings), making easy conversation with other professionals, and learning how to easily navigate the impactful rules of networking.

For purposes of this short article, I've outlined 5 top tips to master to become an effective networker:

- **Choose Wisely.** If you're thinking of attending a networking event and you're nervous about it, select an event with content - a speaker or a panel. That way, you won't be forced to spend several hours networking without a net.
- **Plan Ahead.** If you want to avoid overwhelm at an upcoming networking event, arrive when the networking portion of the event is halfway done. People will be chatting away, and you can join in a group conversation knowing that in twenty minutes, the speaker presentation will begin.

- **Be More Interested Than Interesting.** If you are not a big “talker”, you will be relieved to know that asking opened-ended questions to learn as much as you can about your networking partner is one of the secrets to networker. Try using an ice breaker such as "So, what brings you here this evening?" and then let the other person talk. If a conversational spark develops, you can follow it wherever it leads. Asking questions about themselves and their interests is a great way to learn new things and to build rapport.
- **Wrap up.** End a conversation by thanking your networking partner for his or her time, and expressing your admiration for the person. "I'm so glad I got to meet you - it's been lovely to learn about you!" is a pleasant way to part. If you feel like asking for a business card, by all means do it, but don't ask for it if you just plan to throw it away. Likewise, don't offer your business card to everyone you meet, just because it's a networking event.

If you feel there is some business synergy between you and another person, you may ask "Would you like to grab coffee or lunch one day soon?" You can generally judge that person's interest by their next response.

- **ALWAYS follow up.** The day after a networking event, send an email to the individuals you most enjoyed meeting and thank them for their sparkling conversation. If you can manage it, send something of value along -- the link to an article that's relevant to your new friend's interests, for example.

KLA Marketing Associates is here to assist and support your practice growth. Reach out if we can help!

