



Three Steps to Building Your Network

We've all heard the phrase, "it's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know." In fact, this cliché is so familiar it generates 444,000,000 responses in a [Google](#) search.

But *how* do you get to know the "who?" This can be a perplexing problem for both experienced and inexperienced lawyers entering solo practice. If you just passed the bar or recently moved to Oregon, your network may be virtually nonexistent. How do you get started?

Take a cue from career coach [Maggie Mistal](#). She offers a three-step approach for job hunters that can be successfully applied to lawyers who are building a professional network:

Step One – Define

Why do you want to build a network? Is it all about client development and referrals or do you want to meet people who can be a resource to you? (Answer questions, connect you to experts, provide forms?)

Depending on what you're trying to accomplish, your network can consist of just about anyone. Family and friends are usually big supporters and will happily send work your way. But they can also serve as a connection to someone you don't know. Former classmates, former clients, business and civic contacts, and other lawyers can also serve as part of your network. If you want to find someone who can provide ongoing guidance to you in your career, the best match may be a [mentor](#).

Step Two – Build

Now that you have clarity of purpose, the hard work begins. Fortunately, you already know how to reach out to family and friends – that part is easy. Let them know where you are and what you're doing, but don't take for granted they will automatically send

work your way. When you approach them to announce that you've opened a law office, make the contact as personal as possible. This is one area where "old-fashioned" etiquette (handwritten notes, phone calls, personal visits) can trump announcement cards, letters, or e-mail—although these have their place.

To reignite relationships with classmates, connect on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#). Join your alumni association or at least read your alumni newsletter – news items about people you know can be a basis for reconnecting.

Contacting former clients is a natural for building your network if you worked at another firm before going solo. Oregon Rule of [Professional Conduct 7.3](#) specifically permits direct contact in cases of "prior professional relationships." As with friends and family, make the contact as personal as possible.

Inventory your business and civic contacts. Do you have an existing relationship with a CPA, financial planner, or real estate agent? Do you know people through volunteer activities with civic organizations? If not, don't despair. Over time, you will meet and connect with other business people. If you are thinking about joining what noted author [Jay Foonberg](#) calls the "animal clubs" or similar organizations, remember:

- Your choice must be sincere. Don't join [Rotary](#) if it doesn't appeal to you. Find an organization that suits your values and interests.
- Be prepared to commit. Many of these organizations meet weekly. If this doesn't suit your schedule, the organization is not a good match for you.
- The network you build through civic involvement will pay off *eventually* as you get to know others and they get to know (and trust) you.

Last but not least, don't forget other lawyers. Who would you like to meet? Lawyers practicing in your area of law? Is it most important to stay close to home or find the recognized expert in the state? If you are looking for the latter, find out who talks and writes on a given subject. At the state bar level, check out [CLE publication authors](#), [Bar Bulletin contributors](#), [legislative highlight authors](#), and [OSB CLE speakers](#). Join the [bar section](#) in your area of interest. Executive committee members are very active in their field. Additionally, most sections maintain their own Web sites, newsletters, and listservs which can be a great way to get information or interact.

It's a good idea to [connect with your local bar](#) as well. Introduce yourself to the local bar President. Go to meetings and CLEs. The following county bars have their own Web sites: [Clackamas](#), [Douglas](#), [Lincoln](#), [Marion](#), [Multnomah](#), and [Washington](#). Oregon also offers over [50 specialty legal organizations](#) that may be a good match for you. If you are a new lawyer, don't forget about the [Oregon New Lawyers Division](#) or [Multnomah Bar Association Young Lawyers Section](#). ([Membership is free](#) to new admittees). Both offer CLEs and specific networking events.

Nothing prohibits you from [cold calling \(or "soliciting"\) another lawyer](#). (See Rule 7.3(a)(1).) However, before you do take [Maggie Mistal's](#) advice: know something about

the person you are contacting and show genuine interest. Most people are very willing to tell their story, if asked. But if a contact feels “used” or you clearly know nothing about him or her, it will be a big turnoff.

Use Internet search engines like [Google](#) and [Bing](#) to find out more about people you want to meet. Most established lawyers will have some kind of Web presence: a Web site, a blog, a [Facebook](#) fan page, a [Twitter](#) account, or [LinkedIn](#) profile. If you want to meet someone who is well known in the legal community, but isn’t on the Web, talk to others who know that lawyer.

Finally, if you’re stuck or just need a quick answer, you can use the Oregon State Bar’s [Lawyer-to-Lawyer](#) program which connects Oregon attorneys working in an unfamiliar practice area with experienced attorneys willing to offer informal advice at no charge. If you have a tax or accounting question, use the [Lawyer-to-CPA](#) program. Simply call the Oregon Society of CPAs Peer Consulting Service at (503) 641-7200 (Portland metro area) or 800-255-1470 (elsewhere in Oregon) for a referral. You will need to identify yourself as a member of the bar and specify what practice area your question involves.

Step Three – Maintain

When I was in private practice, our emphasis was on personal injury, medical malpractice, and wrongful death. As you might expect, we got a lot of calls from potential clients who were injured on the job. Since we didn’t handle workers comp cases, these clients were referred out to a particular lawyer my boss knew. The referrals went on for a few years, until one day they stopped. Cold. We finally had an epiphany, and it was a two-parter. First, we realized we never heard from this person. Ever. No acknowledgment, no holiday card, not even a “how do you do?” Secondly, my boss had met another workers comp lawyer who made an effort to build and maintain a real relationship.

The first lawyer had made a fatal mistake – he took us for granted. Having initially forged a relationship, he made no effort to maintain it. We didn’t need a specific “thank you card” each time a referral was made, but at least knowing this lawyer was still alive and kicking would have been nice. Something as simple as a call a few times a year: “How are you doing? How is your family?” would probably have been enough. In retrospect, I am shocked we didn’t stop referring cases to him sooner. Shame on us.

The moral here is pretty simple: once you’ve successfully built a network, don’t let all your hard work go to waste. Relationships must be nurtured and maintained. Keep up with people. Make regular contact. Follow [Maggie Mistal’s](#) advice and offer to be of service to others. If you look at networking as a two-way street, you and your practice will thrive.

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