Successful Holiday Networking: What to Say after "Hello"

By Margaret Grisdela, President of the national legal marketing agency Legal Expert Connections and author of "*Courting Your Clients.*" You can reach her at mg@legalexpertconnections.com or 1-866-417-7025.

Business networking can be like speed dating; you only have a few minutes to make a positive first impression.

In this season of holiday parties, now is the time to invest a few minutes in reviewing your business development goals. Be selective on where you spend your networking time. Focus on those holiday events that offer the highest concentration of your best prospects and skip the rest. Ideally these opportunities are local, but a national or regional practice may dictate that you travel to mingle with the movers and shakers.

Your approach to each new person you meet will vary somewhat with their situation. When introduced, you must determine if they are: a) a prospect; b) a source of referrals; and/or c) a power broker. Plan accordingly. Here are some conversational basics to maximize your networking efforts.

Rule #1: Remember the prospect's name. Do this by repeating your new contact's name when you speak with them (e.g., very nice to meet you, John). Try to create some type of word or image association that will help you establish their name in your memory. Reinforce your recall by introducing your contact to others who stop by and say hello while the two of you are talking.

Rule #2: Ask for a business card. Take note of the information provided, including their title, office location, and any description of services offered. Offer one of your cards in return. Be prepared with a brief but concise "elevator pitch." Here is an example:

> *I am Jane Smith, an elder law attorney with Smith, Johnson & Jones. Our firm has 10 attorneys working from offices in City 1, City 2 and City 3. We help older Americans and their families plan for the healthcare, housing and financial needs required for a secure retirement. Our clients achieve a healthier, more satisfactory lifestyle by knowing their affairs are in order.*

Rule #3: Try to qualify your lead. Chit-chatting about current events may be interesting, but it doesn't help you determine if this person is a potential fit for your legal services. Qualifying questions revolve around the characteristics of your ideal client profile. Ask about:

Demographics. If your practice serves business accounts, try to uncover some key facts like staff size, number of offices, years in business, typical customers, sales cycle, and other pertinent points. If consumers or high net worth individuals are your clients, ask questions about family size, education, cars, home ownership, travel, and hobbies.

Business or Personal Challenges. Try to skillfully uncover areas of concern facing the business executive or consumer. Is there new legislation or existing regulatory compliance requirements that pose a burden for the businessperson? Are they hiring or downsizing? Is financing available for their needs? Consumer issues are likely to be more sensitive, so one approach is to talk about common challenges faced by your clients and see how your prospect responds.

Existing Legal Relationships. It is very helpful to know if your prospect is already working with an attorney. If the answer is "yes," proceed cautiously. Perhaps you have a specialized level of knowledge that may be of interest to the prospect.

Rule #4: Follow up. If you are able to develop a good rapport with the prospect, ask for permission to call for lunch or coffee. It may take 5-6 meetings and a period of time to convert the prospect to a client, so you might as well get started. This will also give you a better chance to understand the benefits your customer will derive from the right solution to their legal challenges.

Rule #5. Track your leads. Avoid the common trap of spending valuable time on networking, only to lose touch with your leads due to work conflicts. Set up a "pipeline" or lead management system that works for you. Common lead tracking software programs include Act!, Goldmine, Salesforce.com, Contact Ease, Interaction by LexisNexis, Microsoft Outlook, or Microsoft Contacts.

Adding even 10-20 new qualified prospects to your pipeline over the holidays can make a big difference in your 2010 business development results.

Networking is a two-way street. Be prepared, listen carefully, and learn how you can help the many prospective clients, friends, and acquaintances you meet. Remember, business development is a process and not an event. Never stop marketing!

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