

Three Misconceptions About Networking

By Lori T. Williams, Owner/Managing Attorney of Your Legal Resource,

In working with lawyers and other professional service providers the last few years, I've noticed three common misconceptions that keep popping up around the topic of networking:

1. Networking doesn't work

Usually what they really mean is that they aren't getting the results they want from their networking efforts. When I ask what their networking strategy is before and after the event, they often admit to not having one.

Merely showing up at an event, giving someone your business card, and waiting for the phone to ring is not networking. However, showing up and exchanging contact information is step 1 in the relationship-building process. You first have to meet someone before you can begin a relationship with him and receive a referral or business from him.

I often tell my professional clients that networking is like dating. You wouldn't expect to marry someone after the first date, so why expect a referral the next day after meeting someone? If you enjoyed talking with someone at an event, and felt he had credibility and potential business synergy with you, then follow up with him for a phone call or meeting and continue the conversation. Or connect with him on LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter. There are many follow-up techniques that work effectively, if you simply use them consistently. Even if you made a great first impression, you need to stay on that person's mind for him to remember you if and when he or someone he knows needs your service. Staying in touch and building the relationship through proper follow-up will allow you to stay on his mind.

2. I don't get business from networking events

The opposite of the passive person who waits for the phone to ring after an event

is "the closer." He views the event as his opportunity to sell you on himself and his business and "close the sale" when all you said was "Hi, Fred, what do you do?"

We've all met, and probably run away from, this type of person at a networking event. He spews as much information as he can, at "hello." Who said we were a prospect or remotely interested in him or his product or service? Even if we might have been interested at some point down the road, he probably killed any chance of our being a client/customer or referral source by trying to sell to us too soon.

Generally these types of people crash and burn. They try this technique until they give up, probably thinking "networking doesn't work." In reality, they didn't understand the process and that networking is about giving before getting, and building a relationship before trying to close a sale. Sure, we all want others to seek our help when they need legal advice or representation, but no one deserves to be hammered with too much information at "hello."

Again, think of the event as date #1 and plan on more dates if you really plan on marrying this person (i.e., he retains your services or refers you to others). And realize he has the right to say no at any point. Just because you pursue a relationship doesn't mean he has to go along with it. If he doesn't see the mutual benefit, he may not want to continue the relationship. People naturally do business with those they know, like, and trust, but it takes time to get to know and trust someone. We can all determine pretty quickly if we like someone, so don't blow it by pushing too hard when you first meet.

The other problem with viewing the event as a means to an end (i.e., to get a client or referral) is that you expect the event to generate a sale for you. Just because you showed up and exchanged con-

tact information doesn't mean your phone is going to ring. Those who expect otherwise will be disappointed and view the event as a failure. The event is only the meeting place. There is still an opportunity to develop a relationship if both parties are willing to pursue it.

3. There's not enough time to network

This objection is either a cover-up for the first two misconceptions noted above, or it is really a time management problem. Most of the people I work with fall into the second category. They couldn't find time to network because they didn't plan for it. It's interesting how professionals are great at making appointments with others (clients who need their services and want to meet), but fail to make time for themselves. It also shows up in other areas. They don't have time to work out, or read (aside from industry information), or take a vacation, or get to their kid's soccer game. The list is endless. The only people they do have time for is their clients, and even some of them are kept waiting if there isn't the proper margin built into the schedule between appointments.

I understand why making appointments with clients is so critical for those professionals who bill by the hour. If they aren't seeing clients, they aren't making money. This is true for lawyers, doctors, fee-based financial advisors, and other professionals who charge for their time. However, if you don't also make time to grow your practice, you won't have more clients after the ones you are currently serving complete their transaction with you.

Making appointments with yourself means realizing that you are as important (and probably more so) than your clients. Remember what they tell you on the airplane: "put the oxygen mask on yourself first, and then tend to your child next to you." If you don't take care of yourself first, you won't be able to take care of anyone else. I suggest the following time-blocking activities to my professional service provider clients, as needed:

- Block out time for family events. Your child will only be in the kindergarten play once.
- Block out time for networking events and follow-up meetings.
- Block out time to do marketing, if you don't have a marketing department or outside agency that does this for you.

These business development processes are as important as your current clients. Networking and marketing are not optional if you want to stay in business.

However, be wise about how and where you spend your time and money. You can exhaust a lot of time and money networking in the wrong places. There are times you'll test out a group to see if it is a good fit for you. That's smart. Better to spend an evening and \$10 or \$20 to determine you don't have the right synergy with that group, than to commit hundreds or thousands of dollars in membership dues and hours of time every week or month. Know who your target clients are and who your target referral partners are and see if the event draws those types of people. If not, examine if there's other value you can gain from being part of the group (education, socialization, charitable cause, etc.), or if there's something you can contribute to the group and which enriches you by doing so (i.e., volunteering time or expertise to a worthy cause, or helping an organization get off the ground). If not, this is probably not a group you want to invest time or money in if your goal is to grow your business. This is not to say you can't go out and have a glass of wine and enjoy yourself for the evening. We all need down time. However, don't confuse this with networking.

Networking occurs wherever you are with other people. It can happen in the line at the post office, or at a networking meeting, or online, or at church, or your child's soccer game. If you are genuinely interested in the people around you and you talk to them and get to know them, you are networking. Some spend too much time "working" the room trying to

sell to the right people, while others spend too much time “socializing” at the event and fail to follow up. Getting the right balance of time spent where your target clients and referral partners are, and building a relationship while having fun with those people, will grow your business.

Points to ponder and share:

- Do you relate to one or more of the common misconceptions above? If so, what will you do differently now?
- Do you have other concerns about networking that keep you from doing it?
- What about networking comes easily to you?

About the Author

Lori T. Williams is a 23-year attorney based in Birmingham, MI. She owns a legal referral and legal consulting business called Your Legal Resource, PLLC. She assists individuals and small businesses in need of legal advice or representation by connecting them with the right legal specialist for their situation. She also provides consulting services for attorneys and other professional service providers on how to generate more business through effective branding, marketing, networking, and by creating strategic partnerships. For more information, visit www.bestlegalresource.com.

