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MANAGEMENT

Structure Your Schmooze

Associate, create and engage in a changing business development scene

By Trish Rubin

The very thought of networking instills skepticism, confusion, and, even fear, in the hearts and minds of many lawyers. In today's competitive market, an attorney's ability to develop a book of clients significantly impacts life — personal and professional. "I didn't go to law school to schmooze," they tell themselves and each other as they lose business to those who see it otherwise. Face it. You can run, but you can't hide. Networking is hot.

Firms invest significant marketing dollars on client origination. Partners and associates in these firms are capable and competent. Their clients are loyal. Still the dollars are spent. To what result? In this new world of building connections for business development, a networking "business as usual" approach just isn't good enough.

Web 2.0 and online social networking add playful and almost devilish complexity to today's networking conversation. IM's, e-mails, text messaging, and online social networks are weaving innovation through the traditional fabric of client development. Confusion about reaching people in today's market grows. Is "face time," the tried and true way of originating business, dead?

Marketing departments will attest technology is begging that question in today's business development land-

scape. If investing solely in event networking is no longer effective, how can firms grow a vibrant client base while testing some of networking 2008's "technarcistic" components?

One response is to simplify the networking conversation with one question asked daily, "Did you ACE your network game today?"

Networking is a contact sport and a high stakes game. Employing a simple strategy, Networking ACE clarifies the fuzzy world of networking for attorneys. Taking on this approach means honoring a few tenets:

- Networking always includes face-to-face connection
- Networking is science, a behavioral science, enhanced by technological science.
- Networking succeeds in small, flexible "bites" within a big model of business development.

Professionals who incorporate these strategies increase their business book as they go beyond occasional, random schmoozing for prospects in big rooms. ACE works because it systematically targets connections within a broad base. ACE means you'll analyze and plan. Most lawyers undersell themselves as networkers. They fail to recognize their lawyering skills can be tuned to the social scene. No need to reinvent yourself, even as the world of business development evolves at top speed. Lawyers have networking skills

beyond schmoozing. ACE expands options systemically. Relying on serendipity or friends for business contact fades. A personal pattern that blends a modern offline and online business development plan emerges.

Networking ACE works on the "many to many" principle. People have networks of hundreds. The prospect in front of you is not the end of your networking rainbow. Look over their shoulders to the next referral. Use many means of developing touch points through face time and technology. You'll be in control, and you'll like networking more.

ACE isn't about changing your personality to acquire business. It's patterning genuine behavior in three distinct ways: how you associate, how you create and how you engage to meet people. In-house marketing departments coach attorneys with a wide array of strategies. Yet a simple, consistent framework used informally, or even formally, with a matrix can structure relationship building. Business development is about relationships.

Try ACE. You'll choose *associate*, *create* and *engage* behaviors daily. Check yourself every day with this question, "Did I ACE my networking game today?" You will know where you stand with prospects. Without stepping into a room to schmooze, you'll get connected.

Associate is the foundation of networking. Meet as many people as you can in your schedule. Develop a presence about you — as a person, not a professional. Lawyers abound. Get the edge personally. Clients hire lawyers they like. People will readily refer you to others because of your personal intensity. Associate feels great because networking is not about you; associate

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implies *them*. When you associate, vary the level of commitment due to time constraints. Occasionally, even supporting associations can have great benefits. They create good feeling and the possibility of prospecting. Make sure you don't talk sales and services when you associate. Develop your presence as a person first.

Join clubs and service organizations. See the difference between joining and supporting. Joining demands more presence, time and commitment. Balance both.

Join your alumni association online. Check out your alma mater online and see who's still on your radar. Use the Web 2.0 options to connect to old school friends and make new connections. Facebook has even inspired AARP to go in this direction.

Go online at your child's school. Every school has a Web site. Many have "meetup" groups for parents and blogs that help you develop a positive social presence even if you're shy in person.

Offer a skill to an organization. Writing? Numbers crunching? Do it within a closed timeframe.

Investigate Web 2.0. Look for associations that post notices online and attend a session. No need to commit to a long association. You'll meet young professionals to refresh your contact base. Choose groups you know nothing about. Join them to make new contacts and learn a new skill.

Investigate online services like LinkedIn.com, Venturestreet.com or Jigsaw.com. Extend your skill at meeting professional people through online social networking.

Create means orchestrating connections and bringing people together. Design a network around personal and professional interests. Create works for

those who dislike the serendipity of networking. You are at the controls. Start small by creating and sponsoring personal events and then go big and increase people's awareness of your unique presence as a professional.

Create contact immediately. Refer for all sorts of reasons, personal and professional, when you meet people. Create a feeling of being connected.

Promptly schedule follow-up appointments. People you meet can be town criers for you. Make them a priority.

Be creative about follow-up. Meet for "tall coffees" or "short stops." Whatever you call these meetings, make them quick meet-ups, not long lunches or dinners. You can save money and time, and quickly develop personal connections.

Bring people together online. Introduce people in your network to each other by e-mail. When they connect, they will be talking about you first. They will refer you.

Create a small networking event around a topic, for CLE credit or for developing connections. Train yourself or someone in your office as a speaker. Develop small talks that relate to topics that would attract clients. You run the show and gain the contact list. Be creative about locating events. They can be held in the community or in offices of the friends you've made as you associated.

Create events at conferences. Speak on topics that are not work related, i.e., wine, travel or poker.

Engage is the organic tool in your toolbox. Work on presence. Engage more effectively with the public, and you establish a genuine contact that builds a client value chain. When you go anywhere, practice social skills that help

engage you relationally with others. Use your eye contact, voice and gestures. Practice these in challenging and comfortable settings. Skills improve as you engage. You never know who will be sitting next to you in public in a social or professional setting ... it could be your next client.

Work on eye contact every day in the mirror so you are purposefully engaging people with your eyes. Attend to the tone of your voice. Is it welcoming? Too rushed?

Remember names by association and repetition. People like people who use their names. Think of how you use your hands in a conversation. Being controlled with gesture, not wild and not stiff, makes people comfortable.

Talk with people outside of the office. Practice saying hello to safe people in public. "Good morning" practice makes you feel less shy. It feels good since it increases your body's oxytocin level.

Identify "safe conversation places" like salons, barber shops, waiting rooms, airports or trains. Converse over general topics, start by asking for time or the weather or directions.

Go online and develop a profile on an online social business network that goes beyond your company bio.

Send e-mails that are short. Use people's names. Keep on the radar by attaching a piece of data or a link that might be of interest.

Networking isn't only schmoozing in a room. It's building solid relationships. In the pursuit of a healthy client base, use your legal acumen and ACE to structure your schmooze. Create a networking plan, with or without a legal marketing department. Associate, create and engage with one question, "Did you ACE your networking game today?" ■