

Fearless Networking



by *Arnie Herz*

It's a given that we advance in the business of law by building our book of business. This is as true for lawyers scaling the ranks at large firms as it is for those looking to survive and thrive in small or solo practices. One of the main tributaries to the sea of legal business is networking.

While this kind of business prospecting is part and parcel of life in the law today, many practitioners readily admit that they'll do almost anything to avoid networking — often to their own detriment. When asked why they resist the resounding call to generate business in this way, lawyers typically say:

- “I don't have time.”
- “I have no idea where to find potential clients.”
- “I don't want to seem pushy, artificial or like the proverbial used widget seller.”
- “Crowds make me uneasy.”
- “I'm too shy.”
- “I'm not a people person.”

Regardless of the different excuses offered, there's a common denominator for this mass avoidance: fear — the fear of venturing into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory; of moving outside the mode of operation and sense of limitation that we've cultivated and clung to for years, often since childhood.

And this fear comes up and takes its stranglehold in the legal profession largely due to widespread misconceptions about networking. This article addresses a key step lawyers can take to dispel their fears by understanding the inner works of networking.

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If asked to close their eyes and produce an unedited screenshot of networking in action, a host of lawyers would depict beverage-wielding, fast-talking pitch people quickly dispensing small talk and business cards in a crowded room. A lack

of authenticity and a palpable sense of desperation pervade the scene. It's not an inviting or a comforting place to be.

Given such negative connotations, it's no wonder that networking triggers trepidation and a conditioned flight response in so many lawyers. But there's a ready antidote for this epidemic of resistance, and that's to demystify networking by stripping it down to its essential parts and seeing it for what it really is.

Contrary to popular portrayal, at its core, networking is not about hard sells, palm-pressing and ego-boosting. It's about genuinely connecting with other people to foster valuable personal and professional relationships. It can be done anytime and anywhere we encounter other human beings: at volunteer activities, houses of worship, PTA meetings, dog runs, dinner parties or business events. We don't need to custom-make networking opportunities. They naturally arise as we go about our daily lives.

Equally organic are the conversations that forge our web of interpersonal connections — our true network. Toss the stilted, scripted dialogue about law firm ranking and business acumen. We make real connections when we “come as we are,” open up, and share our passions, ideas, concerns and vulnerabilities with others in the course of everyday encounters. When we're open and honest with people, they'll likely respond in kind.

The connecting points forged on this kind of intimacy are the sturdiest building blocks of future business associations. But their benefit goes well beyond affording us business success. By genuinely sharing our interests, needs and hopes with other people, we allow meaning, happiness and fulfillment to flow through all facets of our lives.

If conversation does not come easily to you, remember that networking can be done within your comfort zone; that is, in those places and at those times that you feel most at ease and inspired to share something about yourself. Whether or not we're extroverts, we all have experiences, talents and insights that others would like to know about.

This is a point nicely underscored by business-relationship expert Keith Ferrazzi. Author of the national best-selling book “Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time,” Ferrazzi is also CEO and founder of Ferrazzi Greenlight, a consulting and training company based in Los Angeles and New York. He calls the special values we bring to any relationship “currencies.” According to Ferrazzi, our currency is our “capacity to help somebody else fulfill their mission or vision of themselves in some way.”

Most of us have multiple currencies. Some are naturally stronger than others. Although they come naturally to us, to others they are a rarity. To discover our currencies, Ferrazzi suggests that we consider these questions:

- What things do you say about yourself and your interests that excite or intrigue the people you meet?
- When did you help make someone else a success at something?
- Of the times you were able to give, which worked the best, and which felt the best?

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Sharing our currencies with other people is a form of generosity. It's a pledge that we're here to support their dreams and help them address their struggles. Because we give this support in a way that acknowledges and honors our own strengths, we're also buoyed in the process.

Since it's ballasted by intimacy and generosity, networking is as much about listening as it is about speaking. So, go ahead and lend someone your ear. People often feel unheard, and listening to them is a great way to open the lines of connection. Conversely, if you tend to ignore other speakers or take in only snippets of what they say, you might want to boost your active listening skills.

Active listening is a reflective practice. When we actively listen to another person, we try our best to identify the emotions, thoughts and needs they've expressed — however articulately or vaguely — and then reflect them back. In this way, we convey the extent to which we understand what's been said and give the speaker the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings.

Ultimately, active listening lets other people know that we care about them.

When we're in tune with somebody and fully taking in what they say, it shows in our body language. We lean in, make regular eye contact, and uncross our arms and legs. Likewise, we can demonstrate that our attention is undivided by letting the speaker express complete thoughts and asking follow-up questions conveying empathy, rather than advice or criticism.

Although honing our aptitude for active listening takes some time and practice, it's well worth the effort. People routinely come away from such interactions feeling seen, heard and valued as human beings. This type of soul-level recognition is one of the cornerstones of lasting and meaningful relationships.

Beyond engaging our personal currencies and listening skills, networking involves some patience and self-restraint (qualities that lawyers might not routinely tap into). No matter how an exchange begins, it doesn't have to take place all at

once to be fruitful. In our fast-paced world and profession, there's a strong pull toward immediate gratification. But networking is akin to cultivating a field and sowing the seeds of deeper relationships. It often requires us to step back, stop pushing and allow things to germinate gradually from a base of authenticity.

Fortunately, today's technology facilitates the selfless, step-by-step cultivation that a lot of relationships require. Aided by e-mail, cell phones and wireless hot spots, we can regularly touch base with people in our developing network and pass along information that can help them thrive and grow personally and professionally.

Just as we frequently need to respect its slow and steady pace, we must understand that networking is not a *quid pro quo* venture. As Keith Ferrazzi stresses, when connecting with others, we can't always measure the value of the exchange using standard ROI metrics. Rather, first and foremost, we should see the return as commensurate with the joy we derive from the relationship. To do this, we must be willing to give freely of ourselves without looking for the repay.

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Bringing this point home, Ferrazzi observes, "Developing business relationships is just like developing friendships and even romantic interests. You don't keep score in those relationships. Rather, you give, and the relationship grows. And, yes, you often get back. But the first and most important thing you get back is the satisfaction of having given."

Ferrazzi's words are particularly resonant for lawyers, given the malaise, discontent and high attrition rates plaguing our profession. The message sounds loud and clear: in the course of infusing our business and personal lives with the close relationships we cultivate over time, we add a new dimension of meaning and humanity to the everyday practice of law. This is exactly the type of organic change that legions of burnt-out and dissatisfied lawyers say they need to reinvigorate their careers.

When we remove the shroud of misconception and get to the heart and soul of networking — the everyday opportunities we have to genuinely connect and share with other people — the fear factor dissipates. Once we're walking the path of fearless networking, it becomes a natural, easeful and uplifting part of our lives, both inside and outside our professions.

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