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Networking 101: Making the Most of a Networking Opportunity

By Dana M. Hrelc

Networking is one of the best ways for young lawyers to build connections, market themselves, and bring in business. This is especially true here in Connecticut, where we are a small but heavily-connected bar. The thing about networking, though, is that it can be a rather intimidating and overwhelming experience. It can sometimes feel like everyone in the room knows each other already and that they have no interest in meeting or getting to know someone new. For this reason, it is no surprise that the urge to skip networking events can sometimes replace the urge to network at these events, despite how powerfully important in one's career they can be. This is especially so for new lawyers, who are learning how to practice law, building a business and a brand, and trying to fit into their new legal community, all at the same time.

The truth, though, is that *everyone* has these thoughts. New lawyers are not alone! Networking can be intimidating and overwhelming for everyone—even those of us who have become quite seasoned

at it—and it is important to remember that if you break it down, networking can be simple and even fun. Over the past few years, I have been fortunate to have mentors that have guided me through the process of becoming comfortable with networking. I have learned that networking is nothing more than meeting new people and fostering relationships. It is less about you and more about the people you meet. The best way to approach networking is to realize that everyone else in the room also wants to meet new people and build connections—otherwise they would not be there!

Armed with the knowledge that we are all in this together, here are some tips on networking and working a room that I hope both new and more experienced attorneys alike will find helpful.

1. RSVP “Yes”

Networking begins with the commitment to attend an event. We all get dozens of e-mails a week inviting us to lunches, happy hours, dinners, seminars, panels, etc. The sheer number of networking events available can be

overwhelming at times. I have learned that the best place to start when breaking down the networking barriers is by picking just one event and saying yes. RSVP to the organizer to tell them that you will be there, put it on your calendar, and follow through. You will be happy you did.

2. Do your research

What kind of event is this and who might be there? If it is an educational panel or seminar, find out who the speakers are and a little bit about them. If it is a happy hour, consider who was invited and what the purpose of the event is (i.e., young lawyers meet-and-greet, a pro bono reception, etc.). It is always a good idea, no matter what kind of event you will be attending, to think about who will be at the event and to understand the issues relevant to the event and the people attending.

3. Prepare an opening question

It is *always* helpful (and less scary!) to know what you are going to say when you approach someone new to start a conversation. After you say hello and introduce yourself, be prepared with a question to get things started. Because I am almost always at bar association events, I usually start with, "So where

do you work?" or "What do you do?" It is a great way to get the ball rolling.

4. Be ready to talk about yourself

What if someone asks you what you do or where you work? Have your 30-second elevator speech prepared and ready to go. Being able to talk about yourself clearly and succinctly is critical in networking situations.

5. Keep your business cards in a convenient place

One thing I have learned is that having business cards with you at a networking event is a futile exercise when you do not keep them in a convenient, easy-to-grab place. (That place does not include the bottom of a large purse or briefcase!) Nothing is more awkward as you are meeting someone than when you have to keep saying, "Hold on, my business card is in here somewhere, I promise." I always keep extra cards in my suit pocket and in my wallet, making them easy to grab and hand out. Doing so also provides me with a convenient place to put any new business cards I receive.

6. If the large group is overwhelming, find a way to make it smaller

Look for smaller groups of one or two people chatting and join them. Your

conversations in a packed room really can be one-on-one, even if it does not seem possible at first.

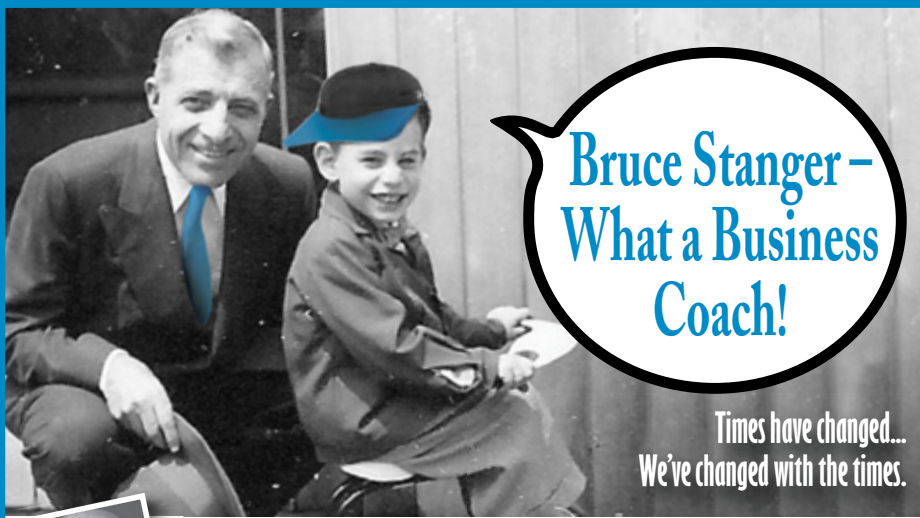
7. Take notes

When you receive someone's business card, jot down a note or two on the back about where you met them and perhaps something specific you discussed. That will make it easy to remember that person and to follow up with them at a later date.

8. To that end—follow up!

If someone gives you their business card, it is because they *want* you to use it. Send them a follow-up e-mail a day or two later to say hello and tell them how much you enjoyed meeting them. If you shy away from personal e-mails after networking events, do not be afraid to use LinkedIn to connect with some of the people you met. Afterward, do not be afraid to check in on your new connections. Send them a note to say hi, invite them to an upcoming networking event, or share something of interest.

Networking is never easy, but it does get *easier* the more you do it. Remember: do not be afraid to say yes, arm yourself with easily-accessible business cards, and practice that elevator speech. You will do great. Happy networking and good luck! **CL**



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