

NETWORKING ROI: Understanding the Return on Investment for Lawyers

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Wolf in the Workplace Legal

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Word Count: 1670

Time to Read: 3-4 minutes

Everyone knows that, much like diet and exercise, networking is good for you and that, similarly, there are lots of excuses for avoiding it.

As a practicing lawyer, the need to "get out there and network!" engenders powerful attitudinal obstacles. But without pursuing a course that taps networking as a business development tool, you are simply, less than your potential. The more one invests in networking, the more returns there are for oneself and your law firm.

Understanding Networking—An Attitude Adjustment

When coaching lawyers or conducting CLEs on business development, I hear a lot of resistance to incorporating networking as a means of building a book of business. Here are the most common excuses:

- I don't have the time.
- I'm a professional; networking is like being a salesperson.
- It is outside my comfort zone.

A better understanding of what networking really is will convince you that most anyone can learn to do it comfortably. A better understanding will also lead to a realization of how indispensable it is.

Let's discuss first what networking is not. Networking is not showing up at a conference or reception glad-handing and distributing business cards to strangers. Who wouldn't feel uncomfortable doing that?

Networking is a straightforward concept. It's building a network of people for the purpose of mutual assistance.

Put the emphasis on *mutual*. It's not "I want your legal business." Rather, it's developing relationships among those who can help one another in professional, as well as personal, ways. In its simplest form, networking presents a platform for exchanging information that is mutually beneficial. It may be about a legal advice, but it could even be about a baby sitter or plumber if the need is expressed.

Further, and this is key to building a network, it's more about giving than receiving. Only when you give (advice, praise, recommendations, etc.) do relationships grow and develop. Once that occurs, it's only a matter of time before you get something back.

It's human nature; people like to reciprocate. Developing trusting and dependable relationships, however, doesn't happen in one meeting. It is a process, and it requires persistence and patience to reap the benefits.

Getting Past the Excuses

No more excuses! Below, I discredit the attitudes that stand in the way of networking progress:

I don't have the time.

Once it's understood what a well-developed network can accomplish, it can actually be a time saver. For instance, everyone who is part of your network is a potential resource, with access to information, opportunities, or ideas that could otherwise require hours of your time to gather. With an established network, it's possible the answer to a practice management issue is only a phone call or two away.

However, the main reason lawyers should network is for business development. Attorneys have a tendency to overestimate the importance of their technical skills when, in fact, prospective clients are weighing more "human" considerations, such as "Is this someone I get along with?" and "Can I trust this person?"

Think about the successful lawyers you know. Are they the most exceptionally skilled or technically competent legal professionals? If not, then what is it that sets them apart and sparks their success? Undoubtedly, it's the number of people they know and the quality of the relationships they have with them. Building meaningful relationships, over time, is the key to a robust practice; and effective networking is the genesis for developing those relationships.

Here it is in a nutshell: Having an effective network is one of the most critical components of being a successful lawyer. As such, taking the time to network must be a priority.

I'm not a salesperson.

If there's a consistently common objection to networking that I hear, it's "I didn't go to law school to be a salesperson!"

Don't confuse networking with a sales call. Remember, networking is about sharing information and listening for ways to be of mutual assistance.

Letting people you meet know that you practice law in a firm that offers a range of services is *information*, not sales. Lawyers need to shift their attitude if they think that networking is the same as "selling" legal services. Most people are grateful to know where to find a lawyer when they need advice about estate planning, protecting a company's intellectual property, completing a business transaction, or trying to keep someone out of jail. And all lawyers can be proud of the fact that they earn their living by helping people.

It's out of my comfort zone.

Just as networking is not handing out business cards at receptions, it is also not cold calling complete strangers. Rather, think of it as developing relationships with people with whom you may be acquainted, but would like to know better.

Is a cup of coffee or lunch out of your comfort zone? I have coached well over one hundred lawyers from across the nation who practice at firms of all sizes. Rarely have I worked with an attorney who could

not carry on a pleasant conversation in a one-on-one setting.

Start with people you already know, professionally or personally, to create a contact list. Think about people who can benefit from an enhanced relationship with you. Here's a starter list of prospects:

- Law firm (cross-sell)
- Clients
- People from bar association or trade/industry organizations
- People from organizations where you volunteer
- Opposing counsel from past cases
- Extended family members
- Friends (and their friends)
- Neighbors (do you ever wonder what to talk about at the annual block party?)
- People you went to college or law school with
- People from previous jobs
- Members of your church or synagogue

Then what?

It's called a contact list for a reason. Prioritizing the list, contact these people to set up a casual get-together. Connect with a college alum who is starting a new business or another lawyer who could be a good referral source.

Be prepared that not everyone will accept your outreach, so don't take it personally. They are either too busy or are too shortsighted to see the benefits of networking. Remember that 70 percent of the time, the best baseball players don't make it to first base when they come to the plate. If you can enhance your relationship with 25 percent of those on the contact list, you're doing fine.

Building a network is a numbers game. It's not about having the best personality or leading the popularity chart. To be successful at it, you must continuously circulate, adding new names to your contact list. Building your network within groups where prospective clients or referral sources are likely to be found. You can do that by attending conferences, becoming active in professional and community organizations where you interact with many individuals and where your contributions to the organization are visible. You might feel more comfortable joining a committee where you can meet and build rapport with a smaller group. Networking doesn't happen in your office: Get out and meet someone new.

Practical Tips for Effective Networking

If I have achieved my goal, I've made the case for the value of networking and that it doesn't have to be an uncomfortable exercise. Here are some general tips to make those networking efforts more effective:

1. **Network systematically.** Make a contract with yourself that you will spend a certain amount of time networking. For example, your contract could be a commitment to have a certain number of coffees, lunches, or association gatherings per month. Keep the commitment realistic. If you set your sights too high, you'll likely get frustrated and stop all of your efforts. The goal is eventually to make networking a seamless habit.

2. **Listen.** Remember the ears-to-mouth ratio. You have two ears and one mouth. Listen at least twice the amount of time you talk. If you don't listen, you will not learn how you can help this person.
3. **Follow up** with regular communication and thoughtful gestures. Email your contacts an article they might find interesting, send a card when a child graduates from college, a plant on a birthday, or make a plan for lunch again later in the year.
4. **Be enthusiastic.** Few people hire lawyers who don't enjoy what they do. When I was an in-house attorney, I wanted lawyers who truly loved what they did. I was once involved in a First Amendment case and was seeking counsel. I obtained three referrals. On paper, they all had the necessary credentials and experience. I then interviewed all three. One lawyer in particular simply exuded a passion for the First Amendment when we talked. Guess which one I hired?
5. **Be confident, not arrogant.** Many lawyers find it difficult to strike the proper balance. Of course, I always wanted to hire lawyers who sounded like they knew what they were doing. Unfortunately, there were many who crossed the line, boasting about themselves or their law firm. I was never impressed, but I was always incredibly bored.
6. **Be patient.** How many people do you know who got married after only one date? Then why expect to be hired after one lunch? Remember, networking is a process of building relationships. It may take years of staying in contact before being retained.

The ROI

There's the cliché, "it's not what you know that counts, it's who you know." Well, in the legal industry, we know for sure that what you know is of primary importance. But it doesn't do much good if others don't know you know it.

Investing the time to develop a wide network of informational resources, advisors, and prospects yields a return that exponentially increases over the years. And that's because just about all the contacts you make, at some point in their personal or professional lives, will need legal services. Wouldn't it be great if you popped into their minds? Networking effectively will assure that outcome.

Contact us today at (858) 638-8260 or email jeff@wolfmotivation.com to see how we can help your team realize a return on your networking ROI.