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## MANAGEMENT

### Networking Success for the Single Attorney

Unique strategies you can pursue

By Christy Burke

The American Dream has changed, especially for many urban professionals. Previously, getting married, having kids, moving to the suburbs and keeping up with the Joneses was the ultimate way to go, even for the lawyer billing 80-plus hours per week. Many people are still doing that, but now, many single and divorced people are savoring their unmarried lifestyles, and are leveraging the freedom of being unattached to creatively develop their business networks.

Being single today, even well into your 30s, 40s and beyond, is not necessarily seen as a strange anomaly or sign of instability. Being unmarried doesn't have to negatively impact networking for attorneys. In fact, there are unique strategies you can pursue when networking as a single attorney, and these differ from the options that married people have.

Certain doors are wide open for single people that are closed to their married counterparts, and yet some obstacles still do result from not being married. There are also differences between single men and women attorneys in terms of network-

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*Burke, a member of Marketing the Law Firm's Board of Editors, is President of Burke & Company, a New York-based public relations and marketing firm. Reprinted with permission of ALM Law Journal Newsletters' Marketing The Law Firm.*

ing, especially when it comes to the possibility of a romantic relationship that can arise while making contacts.

#### Free To Be Networking

Hays Ellisen, a partner at Katten Muchin Rosenman, says that being single gives him the ability to plan casual, fun events in the evenings. According to Ellisen, accessibility is a benefit of being single. "Married people in some cases are less accessible than single people. I can do lunch, dinner, drinks and after-hours events."

Olivera Medenica, a partner at Wahab & Medenica, agrees that having evenings free and attending networking events is a huge advantage of being single. Medenica is extremely prolific in attending, as well as organizing, networking events for attorneys. She chairs committees for both the NYC Bar and the New York County Lawyers Association (NYCLA). Through NYCLA, she runs PartnerTrack, a lawyers' networking group that has bimonthly cocktail events after work.

Medenica notes, "I have the flexibility to network between 6:30-8 p.m., and that is a time when many cocktail and bar association events are held. People who have children often have problems with this time, but since I'm free of those responsibilities, I can join as many committees and attend as many functions as I want."

Kaye Scholer counsel Mike Sapienza recommends taking the initiative in planning social events for current and prospective clients. He says, "When you're single,

it's easier to go out after events and be spontaneous. I go out of my way to initiate social events and to cultivate social relationships with my clients. If they think of me as a friend, they are more likely to call me when they have questions or concerns, or deals they may want to bring me in on."

Peggy Farber, an associate at Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel, is divorced with grown children. She got her law degree at the age of 51 and is now aggressively pursuing her legal career. Farber says, "Since I don't bring a spouse to firm functions, I am very free to sit with people I don't know and engage them in conversation. I push myself to do this." Farber adds that being older than her fellow associates is a plus rather than a minus. She says, "Since I'm in my 50s, I have a totally different peer network that is older, more wealthy and established. I am on the boards of my children's schools and my building, and I meet people that are potential clients for the firm."

#### Walking The Line Personal vs. Professional

Bob Perry is managing partner of King & Spalding's New York office. He says that being single has never impacted his legal career, or his networking. "Clients have not questioned my being single. I do, however, gauge people's comfort level and act accordingly. For example, if a client is bringing his wife and kids to an event, I'll consider bringing another partner from the firm with me to

balance out the situation.”

Single female associates are often concerned about enforcing the personal/business frontier, anticipating that it will always be an issue. Medenica points out, “Single women often have the preconceived notion that men are going to make unwanted advances toward them at events, while men do not go in expecting women to bother them. Therefore, women are going in with a weaker position from the outset. Women need to present themselves with confidence, which is hard if you feel vulnerable. It’s important for women to stand up for themselves and be aware of their surroundings, but there is no need for them to expect harassment from men.”

Medenica concedes that she doesn’t often get approached by men inappropriately, which she thinks may result from her being the organizer of the events. Also, since she is a partner in her own firm, rather than being an associate at a firm, she has more power to decide with whom she networks, and what kind of behavior she will or will not tolerate. She can fire a client, but many female associates do not have this luxury, and they are in a tougher position.

Kramer Levin associate Tamika Cushenberry has had first-hand experience with networking as a single female attorney, and she admits that it is difficult when men’s personal/professional intentions are unclear. She is very serious about keeping the relationship professional and not blurring the line. “As a woman,” she says, “I want to be very clear to appear professional. With men, I find that my conversations are more formal than familiar, which could impact the natural development of a relationship. In general, I don’t feel that I am fully receptive to men reaching out to me in what appears to be a professional context, and I’m definitely more conserva-

tive than aggressive in pursuing business relationships with men.”

Sapienza agrees that erring on the side of formality is the way to go when talking to a single person of the opposite sex. He doesn’t ask female clients out, especially those at more senior leadership levels. If he is interested in a business colleague on a personal level, he starts with lunch first. “I’d always pursue the business relationship first. Then, if it turns personal, that’s fine, but I’d never pursue the personal first and then expect a business relationship to result from that.”

### Know Your Audience

Various types of networking events require a tailored approach. If you’re a single attorney, you may have to make adjustments for events that are specifically geared toward people with spouses and children, or for events that have more of a social tone.

Ellisen recently went to a Knicks game with a partner and client from his firm. Both of the other men brought their children, and the conversation revolved around the children’s basketball team. Ellisen says, “Married people can make contacts through coaching, church, synagogue, neighbors, school boards, etc., but as a single person, I usually come in focused on talking about the business.”

Medenica says that she generally avoids going to off-site retreat events dominated by family activities, but that when she does go to them, she makes sure to be inclusive of the contact’s family when she’s networking. “If the husband is a business prospect, sometimes I’ll end up networking with his wife instead, or talking with them both together. In this scenario, I make sure to include the wife in the conversation, and to explain legal terms to her if she’s not an

attorney. Ignoring or excluding the spouse is never a smart move.”

Cushenberry points out that an event’s chosen venue often signals what kind of networking she’ll encounter. “I think about whom I’m going to the functions with, what type of event it is, and where it is being held. At business-oriented events held at hotel ballrooms such as awards ceremonies or one-off conferences, I often exchange cards with other professionals, both men and women, but often find there is less follow-up with the men. However, at young professionals’ events held in restaurants, clubs, bars and lounges, although they are billed as business-oriented, I have noticed that they are less focused on business and more focused on fostering personal relationships. Since I feel more vulnerable to men approaching me at these events, I often don’t give my card out to men unless I’ve met them several times, or until after we have discussed business, issues, events or programs of mutual interest.”

From a networking standpoint, being a single attorney has tremendous advantages in terms of flexibility and time to network. However, it is fraught with the challenge of keeping personal and professional contacts separate enough to ensure the integrity and longevity of relationships. Keeping in touch with people, single and married, as they change jobs and move up, is beneficial for all attorneys.

By initiating and attending events that suit your personality and interests, and setting clear boundaries for yourself and others, you can enjoy networking and leverage your personal freedom as a single attorney into professional accomplishment. Fortunately today, whether you’re single, divorced or married, basically you can rewrite the American Dream to read any way you want. ■