

THE PLACE TO NETWORK

Creative Networking Programs to Catalyze Client Development

The New Face of the Meet-and-Greet

By Christy Burke

Networking has become extremely important for law firms, especially now that the legal business is growing more and more competitive. If your attorneys are not getting out there to stake claim to new relationships (and new matters), someone else will. Fortunately, attorneys and firm marketing professionals who are at the forefront of networking have developed innovative programs to assist attorneys in making a stranger into an acquaintance, an acquaintance into a prospect, and a prospect into a client. Ah — the circle of life!

RELATIONSHIPS

At the core of any networking program is the development and maintenance of relationships. According to law firm marketing expert Betiayn Tursi of Tursi Law Marketing Management, and Editor-in-Chief of this publication, “Networking is about building trust — maybe even building friendships. It’s about the face-to-face connection and bringing together people who normally wouldn’t have occasion to meet.”

The most successful networking programs are those that physically gather people to meet in person. In today’s world of e-correspondence, it may seem a lot easier and more cost-effective to send out an e-mail blast to a thousand recipients rather than send out printed invitations, schedule an in-person visit, or motivate clients or prospects to come to an event. It’s easy to hide behind e-mail, especially if you’re super-busy, which most legal professionals are. However, if you choose to subsist on an e-mail-only diet with your clients, do so at your own risk. You may eventually find that the relationship begins to deteriorate due to neglect and lack of the personal touch. And if you’re e-mailing prospects who don’t even know you in the first place, don’t be surprised if they block your e-mail address or your message gets unceremoniously dropped into their spam tank.

NETWORKING PROGRAMS THAT WORK

So what are firms doing to provide interesting, stimulating networking programs that will attract quality prospects and foster new business development? If you do a little digging, you’ll realize that there are many different approaches to networking for client development. What works for your firm may be a composite of several different tactics that best suit your practice areas and firm culture.

Luncheon Programs

Keith James, Director of Marketing for GrayRobinson, says that his firm runs an event series called “Community Leadership Forums” which has been highly effective in maintaining and attracting new clients to the firm. The lunchtime events showcase a notable community figure or governmental leader from the area who delivers a speech to the attendees. Past speakers have included mayors, state attorney generals, military leaders (including General Tommy Franks) and international officials such as the Prime Minister of the Bahamas. The program has been in existence for over ten years and is hosted in six of the firm’s ten offices throughout Florida.

James says that the marketing committee decides on the event’s timing, venue and guest speaker. Then the attorneys are asked to submit a list of names of clients, referrals and friends of the firm they would like to invite. Attorneys are encouraged to attend the Community Leadership events and ideally to fill an entire table, but at least to invite one to five people. The marketing department organizes and runs the events, and then checks in with the attorneys to make sure they are following up on the relationships yielded from the event. In order to assist the lawyers with prompt follow-up, the marketing department sends personalized letters to all the attendees on behalf of each attorney.

The Community Leadership Forums have been great for GrayRobinson. James says, “While these events are not inexpensive to hold, they are often considered among the most effective ways to network and market the firm. They are par-

ticularly useful for the attorneys who are not considered to be the 'strongest' of marketers. Since these events bring in a cross-section of leaders from the state and community, they have a certain cachet — they impress the attendees." From what James describes, the Leadership Forum events not only facilitate networking for the firm's attorneys, but also they are a great branding opportunity for the law firm itself to accentuate its credibility as a leading legal institution.

Sponsorship Opportunities And Cultural Events

"Pay to Play" sponsorships, when selected wisely, can be extremely advantageous in positioning your firm in the right way — and giving you access to influential people. One of the most effective events that Tursi organized was a sponsorship her firm bought through *Institutional Investor magazine*. The event they sponsored was a CEO Roundtable event in Naples, FL. There were only four sponsors and Tursi's firm was the only law firm represented. Attending the event were over 100 CEOs from the Fortune 1000. The event combined panel discussions, plenary sessions, a golf tournament and various social events. Tursi notes that the expense of the sponsorship was well worth the cost: "How often do you have a situation where the Partners of your firm can interact with such an esteemed crowd? It's about creating business development situations during social interactions." Tursi also mentions that cultural events and board/council memberships also provide a conducive setting in which to meet, and send a positive branding message about your firm. Involvement in the arts puts you shoulder to shoulder with an echelon

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of people who may have the need for your legal services one day.

SPEED NETWORKING

In addition to law firms initiating their own networking programs, business and trade associations have generated excellent ideas and strong energy to foster white-collar networking. Speed Networking, an interesting twist on business matchmaking that uses the format of speed dating, has become a popular new approach. At these events, the professionals sit down across the table from one another and talk for several minutes about their respective areas of specialization. Then, after a few minutes, they rotate seats to talk to another person. The process continues until many participants have gotten to know each other. By the end of the event, attendees have spoken with many colleagues whom they can add to their referral network — and more importantly, they have circulated their business cards and shared their smarts with others who can refer new business to them. The Speed Networking formula can also be done with lawyers only and has been done by law school alumni associations and legal trade associations. The events are relatively easy and inexpensive to set up — and they can be a lot of fun.

ORGANIZING RETREATS: PUT THE BOON IN BOONDOGGLE

Since for lawyers time *is* actually money, it can often be a challenge to implement internal networking programs at the firm. Marketing departments work hard to develop events and strategies but don't always succeed in getting the attorneys to participate. One proven way that works is to organize retreats, preferably at a place where they can mix business with recreation and perhaps family-oriented events. In addition to being a positive bonding experience for all involved, a well-done retreat gives firms an opportunity to foster networking among their peers.

The larger and more geographical spread out that law firms get, the more compartmentalized they can become. In order to mix together ideas between practice areas and locations, a retreat can be designed

to bring together attorneys from disparate groups who might not otherwise meet.

ANATOMY OF A PARTNER RETREAT

Tursi describes a three-day partner retreat she organized, which was designed to bring together partners of a national firm that had offices on both coasts of the U.S. She describes the three-day progression as follows:

Day One

Partners from both the East and West coasts were first grouped by their practice areas. This immediately created cross-pollination and idea sharing. The partners were asked to start consolidating information regarding their clients and projects.

Day Two

Interdisciplinary groups were formed — Tursi calls this "interdisciplinary networking." One group combined an intellectual property lawyer, a corporate lawyer, a litigator, a tax partner, etc. Then each group's members openly discussed their clients. Partners immediately picked up on untapped opportunities. The entertainment lawyer would describe a client and the question would arise "Why aren't we doing their tax work too? Who is in New York that can service that need?"

Day Three

On the third day, a facilitator hired by Tursi created and posted a consolidated matrix of the previous day's discussions. That matrix was transferred to an online grid that would play an important role in the follow-up. All the firm's clients were listed. Everyone could see who knew whom. Partners would then commit to arrange lunches and meetings for their fellow partners to facilitate the networking process.

Tursi said that the partners came back from the retreat happy and motivated. Then it was her job, in conjunction with the firm's marketing department, to handle the follow-up. The retreat needs to be a springboard into action for the attendees and the marketing department needs to safeguard and reinforce that process. According to Tursi, "The follow-up is crucial. The marketing department has to go to the partners and find out what has been done since the retreat.

We help them to craft letters or suggest articles that would be relevant to enclose with the letter as a value-add. It's vital to get a dialogue going."

Networking is all about getting people in the same room to talk to each other about what they're doing and what they need. It doesn't sound difficult and yet it sometimes is. Developing networking programs —

and actually implementing them well — is incredibly important to the health of your client development effort. Whether you're a solo practitioner or managing partner of a huge legal juggernaut, your ability to interact face-to-face with clients and prospects can make the difference between reaching the stratosphere and being stuck in the basement. It's

OK to talk to strangers — in fact the future of your practice depends on it!



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