

## Lunching Up — From the Meal to The Deal

**By Christy Burke**

Gone are the days of the three-martini lunch! Today's frenetic business pace makes a long, leisurely meal seem both improbable and impossible for lawyers. After all, "How in the world will I get all this work done if I waste 75 minutes on lunch?" For most lawyers, lunch time means hunching over takeout at a cluttered desk, anxiously reading and responding to e-mails from their Blackberry devices.

The unforgiving mantra of "more billable hours" continues to apply pressure to legal professionals and can lead to extremes. Even the most extroverted lawyer can unwittingly get in the habit of squirreling away in an office barricaded by document filled Banker's Boxes. Attorneys who travel frequently and live in a virtual world of laptops, VPNs and PDAs have difficulty finding time for face to-face meetings with their current clients, much less prospective ones.

Has the importance of billing time all but eclipsed the potential gain of going out to lunch with a prospective client? As profits per partner keep skyrocketing, the case needs to be made for the old-fashioned business lunch. Clever "rainmakers" have a keen eye for business development. They have realized that this forum presents a brilliant opportunity for networking and smoking out new opportunities. New clients aren't lining up outside your office so get smart and get out of that chair!

By carefully choosing and planning lunches with key contacts, marketing savvy lawyers are building their practices, their profits and are actually fueling their billable hours. They have learned how to "Lunch Up" and are reaping the benefits.

### THE ART OF 'LUNCHING UP'

Lunching Up is a multi-phased networking strategy that was explained to me at a LFMP (Law Firm Media Professionals) meeting by attorney Doug O'Brien. Doug, who is a broadcaster, lawyer and long-time public relations adviser to the New York State Bar Association, says that Lunching Up is a unique contact-leapfrogging method originally developed by an attorney colleague. What sets Lunching Up apart from regular prospecting is that you first set your sights on meeting with a junior-level or lateral contact at the prospect company rather than fixating at the outset on speaking with the decision-maker. According to O'Brien, the lawyer who invented Lunching Up "swore by it" as a way to gradually slide into the decision-maker's office to win the prospect's business.

Here's how Lunching Up works. The attorney, aided by the firm's marketing department, identifies a target company or department within a company to pitch. If possible, the attorney networks within the firm or with external colleagues to get a contact name at the company. If you can set up and confirm a lunch date and actually manage to have that lunch with the general counsel or executive right away, congratulations -- you are in the top .001% of the class and you probably don't need to even be reading this column. For the rest of you, the Lunching Up technique offers an alternative strategy which is totally within your grasp. Though it takes a little more time and expense, it is a proven method to climb the ladder and indeed reach the top.

### **BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP**

The real secret to Lunching Up involves a first-step strategy of meeting and treating a junior or mid-level person to lunch. The junior-level person feels important to be taken out to lunch and can provide valuable insight into how the organization works; what RFPs (Requests for Proposal) are being prepared for upcoming matters; and most importantly who the final decision-maker will be in selecting legal service providers.

Invest in selecting a nice place for lunch. Remember that your intention is not only to gather information about this person and the prospect company but that you also want to *impress* him/her. Focus on making a strong impression that will result in endearing yourself enough to this person so that he/she is motivated enough to refer you to someone higher on the ladder with a vote of confidence. Think of what questions you want to ask ahead of time but let them do most of the talking. You might want to consider reading Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which will help you think from the other person's point of view, not just your own.

Handling this initial lunch with finesse brings you closer to your ultimate goal, that of establishing a beachhead at the prospect company so they will become your new client. Since your lunch partner is referring you to a higher-up, you will have a warm introduction which is priceless. For anyone that has ever suffered through cold-calling a prospect, you know that a "warm" lead where you can use someone's name magically increases your success rate and decreases your anxiety level. Couldn't we all use more success and less anxiety in our lives?

### **TIPS ON NETWORKING TO MEET CONTACTS**

Meeting contacts initially so you can then Lunch Up can be a challenge to networking-averse lawyers. Olivera Medenica of Wahab & Medenica LLC has found success in meeting prospects at both large and small events and then inviting them to lunch shortly thereafter. Medenica recommends that attorneys be selective about attending events. Do your homework ahead of time so you don't waste hours on an event that will not generate business. Enlist the help of your marketing department to determine which events are appropriate. This is one of the services provided by the staff of a marketing department. If possible, obtain a list of attendees ahead of time so you can focus on meeting specific prospects. Note that events that have an entry fee sometimes yield more valuable contacts than free events. Medenica suggests getting to know the organizers of the event and asking them to introduce you to desired contacts.

If you are a competent presenter, consider offering to do a lecture for the organization. Speaking on an educational legal topic will showcase your knowledge, generate leads and reflect well on your firm. It will also have the added effect of getting you in front of an entire audience of Lunching Up candidates. You benefit from the mantle of credibility of that association when you deliver your talk. If you are deathly afraid of public speaking, consider taking a Dale Carnegie class or equivalent. Your firm might even invest in you by paying for your tuition! Also, if you have interest in speaking or writing articles, be sure to notify your firm's marketing department. They are always looking for attorneys who will assist them in promoting the firm and its attorneys.

Applying targeted networking tactics such as Lunching Up shows that you are proactive in bringing new business into the firm. Instead of dreading your weekly or monthly attorneys' meetings, you will look forward to them because you will have plenty to say about the new business you are going after. Start with scheduling one lunch out every week with a prospective contact. Cultivating those new relationships will undoubtedly position you for advancement at your firm whether you are an associate on partnership track or are a partner building your book of business.

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