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THE PLACE TO NETWORK

O Come All Ye Rainmakers: Holiday Networking For Attorneys

By Christy Burke

This is the season to be networking! Holiday parties are not just about overpriced venues and open bars. As an attorney, if you are smart about where you spend your time and how you prepare, these festive events can also be about networking, business development and building relationships with people important to your law practice — past, present and future.

For most attorneys, December is dominated by celebratory events — and each one can be an opportunity to make new contacts and further existing ones. People are generally relaxed and in good spirits at holiday parties; therefore they are often receptive to making new acquaintances. By taking a strategic approach to your holiday party planning, you stand to benefit from them greatly.

For some lawyers, invitations pour in via e-mail and snail mail, so you might find yourself having to choose which ones to attend and which to decline. Other attorneys have a narrower circle of contacts, so the holidays can be a time where you feel as though everyone except you is at some fabulous party. And then there is your own firm's holiday party, if your firm has one — how do you make the most out of that already-paid-for extravaganza?

INSIDER NETWORKING AT YOUR OWN HOLIDAY BASH

Attorneys who work for large AmLaw 100 firms seemingly have it made. Usually, there's a lavish holiday bash to which they can invite clients and prospects, where environs are highly conducive to wining and dining key people. However, in order to take full advantage of this opportunity, prior planning is very helpful.

Adele Hogan is a Partner at White & Case LLP's New York office — she specializes in securities offerings, M&A and other corporate work. Hogan says that preparation is the key to extracting optimal results from her firm's holiday party. "Before the firm's holiday event, I obtain the guest lists, pull bios of key guests, and call guests I have invited ahead of time to ensure their attendance." During the actual party, Hogan says that she avoids getting engrossed in deep conversations or topics. "I try to keep conversations light, upbeat and positive," she says.

In addition to relying on the firm's holiday party, Hogan suggests creative alternatives such as hosting a short tour at a local museum followed by lunch for 10-15 clients. She says that it's relatively inexpensive to hire guides for such tours and you have more bonding time with your clients, since it's a smaller group. These can be done any time of year, but are especially effective around holiday time.

HOLIDAY IDEAS FOR THE INDEPENDENT ATTORNEY

Many lawyers, especially solo practitioners, don't have the luxury of a fancy firm-sponsored party to which they can invite guests. Instead, they need to be proactive in creating their own holiday gatherings, or in attending events sponsored by associations, clients or other entities.

Solo tax attorney Marcel Florestal will be throwing his first holiday party ever this year; it will be an elegant dinner and fundraiser with a select client invitation list. Florestal suggests that your party should reflect your own personality and the image you would like to project. "My holiday party will be elite and small — that is intentional so people can meet each other. There will be two people hosting — myself and a trusted colleague of mine who will facilitate people meeting each other. Our aim is to keep the gathering very intimate and high-end."

Self-employed lawyers can sometimes find it rather isolating to be an independent around holiday time. Since they are not attached to a larger firm, they may find themselves scrambling to fill their holiday calendars, especially with events where they can dictate the attendees. This challenge lends itself to innovative solutions, though.

Evans Legros is a real estate, immigration and entertainment lawyer with his own practice. In December 2004, Legros teamed up with a fellow attorney to begin the "Solo-Practitioners' Holiday Party" in New York City. The party is not for

attorneys and their clients, actually — instead it is for solo practitioners only, so they can meet, greet, and fuel their lawyer referral pipelines.

Legros says that when organizing the Solo-Practitioners events, he *never* invites his clients — the goal of the party is to meet other attorneys who are also self-employed. He says, “Many solos hail from prestigious law firms and made the decision to start their own practices. With the once-guaranteed holiday party no longer in place, they find their holiday calendars bare.” Legros says that attorneys forge new business relationships with each other at the party, and then refer their clients to specialists in other practice areas. Most of the attorneys offer each other a financial incentive to colleagues for these referrals, so there is an added bottom-line benefit to the networking.

However, Legros issues a major caveat to solos and to attorneys in general. “Never mix clients and colleagues who are potentially the competition,” he says. “That is the best way to lose clients. Attorneys follow a code of ethics and probably would not steal a client from you, but clients follow a different code and may approach the attorney directly without your knowledge.”

Instead of inviting his clients to the solos’ party, Legros hand-picks certain ones to attend a huge blowout bash given by Select Office Suites (SOS), the shared space in which his office is located. At SOS, he has an office alongside several hundred other professionals and entrepreneurs. The office party includes all occupants and their circles of con-

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tacts, too. Legros reports that bringing clients to this party gives him the opportunity to showcase the space, meet new business prospects, and reinforce his commitment to current clients. Also, by having clients on his own turf, Legros maintains control over the situation and doesn’t jeopardize contacts by inadvertently introducing them to competitors.

CHOOSE EVENTS WISELY

In addition to dealing with your own holiday party, you’ll get invitations from associations, clients, business associates and personal connections. How do you decide which ones to attend and which to politely decline or ignore? For attorneys, time is literally money, and you’ll also have personal commitments cluttering up your calendar, so you want to be sure to make the most of whichever events you attend.

The holiday season only lasts a few weeks, so first you may want to map out your time availability from Dec. 1-24. List all the time slots you have available, and nail down tentative plans to the exact date and time whenever possible. If planning your own holiday event, you may want to check with the most important attendees first to see which date they can make, and then set the date according to their openings. Then you’ll know which dates you’ll be free to network elsewhere.

Hogan attended approximately 15 holiday parties last year and plans to increase that number this year. She makes an effort to attend parties to which she is invited, especially if there will be businesspeople and attorneys there. “If I have conflicts, I will go to holiday parties where I feel I might eventually have the possibility of providing legal services,” she says.

Legros said he went to about seven parties last year, including the solos one which he organized, and plans to do about the same this year. “If you’re invited, it’s important to at least show up if you can to let the clients know that you appreciate their business. That goes a long way,” he says.

Florestal attended at least five last year, and recommends attending at

least one party where he can meet other attorneys with different skill sets, like a Bar association event. “You never know where business can come from. The actual event may not result in business directly, but a contact can snowball into a host of future opportunities.”

FIVE PRACTICAL TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE HOLIDAY NETWORKING

Here are some words of wisdom to help guide your holiday networking efforts. Each tip was suggested by an attorney, and all of them can improve your client development results:

- Avoid bringing a coat or briefcase to a holiday party so you won’t be standing in coat check lines when you could be mingling with clients and prospects.
- When going to several parties in one night, plan transportation carefully. Have transit information, directions, garage locations, car services, etc. lined up, as well as alternative options in case your plan gets derailed.
- Arrive at the event early or before peak time — hosts tend to be there early or on time so you can be sure that he/she knows you came, and you get more meaningful time with clients and colleagues. You can ask the host to introduce you to others if you have one-on-one time with them at the beginning.
- Don’t forget the importance of holiday cards and gifts to thank clients for their business, and to remind prospects that you’re standing by ready to work with them. Remember that including your business card in with the holiday mailings can be perceived as tacky and presumptuous. Also, if your cards are preprinted with your signature or name, consider handwriting a personal note (in pen) for especially important contacts — that personal touch makes a lasting impression!

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Relax, be yourself and don't think about the hard-sell when you're at a party. Concentrate on making a memorable, friendly and professional impression on everyone you meet. After all, you never know where the business can come from!

The chance to expand your book of business is the best holiday present you can give to yourself — and to your firm. Why not ring in the New Year with a bunch of new contacts and potential clients? Strategic networking tactics done right can

lead to an enjoyable and profitable result for all concerned. So line up those invitations and make your plan to network your way through the holiday season!

