

This article first appeared in **Solicitors Journal** on 09.12.08.

How to break the ice

By **Jack Downton**

Brushing up your networking skills will help you build those all-important contacts, says Jack Downton.

With falling house prices, rising unemployment and soaring food prices, after a long day at the office, it is tempting to simply head straight to bed and hide away under the duvet. Yet, as the winter nights draw in, and doom and gloom continues to dominate the headlines, the best thing you can do is put on your glad-rags and head on out.

Having both the skills and confidence to effectively network for your firm becomes even more important during a recession. Yet, whilst some are natural at 'working the room', many find social events more difficult and stressful than a day at the office.

Yet with a few tips, and a bit of practice, any lawyer can improve their networking skills and approach the next corporate event eagerly and confidently.

Preparation

Many lawyers that I have trained over the years are surprised to learn that in order to be an effective networker, a little preparation is key to success. Just as lots of homework is required to prepare for cases and contracts, networking too is much more successful with a little thought beforehand.

A lawyer I trained last year told me: "I never thought of doing homework before an event - I would always just turn up. But that leaves you without a focus and so you end up standing on your own, munching vol-au-vents, and no further forward than when you arrived. By having goals and deciding what you want to achieve, you do end up leaving with a handful of useful business cards".

First impressions

You will need to create the right impression. That means that even though you left the office 20 minutes ago and arrived on the Central Line, you do need to be presentable. So as you arrive, it is worthwhile checking your appearance in a mirror before you enter the room. It is said that a first impression is made within the first ten seconds of meeting someone, so a smart appearance is essential. As you enter the room, smile (it is highly engaging) and make eye contact with those in

the room. It is also worthwhile having some 'ice breakers' in mind to kick start the conversation: the attractiveness of the building, the amount of people at the event, the Central Line, anything to get a flow of conversation going.

When considering who to approach, be careful – those on their own might be on their own because they're not very interesting. Similarly, two people engrossed in conversation might not welcome your addition. A group of three or more however might be the best option, and you should approach making eye contact with the member of the group who seems to be leading the conversation.

Use people's names as soon as you hear them. If names are not offered, ask because leaving it too late might prove awkward. Give firm handshakes and introduce yourself by giving your name.

Small things matter

Before you start to discuss the type of law you're involved in, use small talk to gain people's trust and ask questions to show interest: "How far did you have to travel to get here?"; "What do you think of the sculpture in the lobby?"

Use open questions to encourage free-flowing conversations and use closed questions to confirm understanding. Yet don't monopolise conversations – no matter how interesting your topic might be, everyone should be allowed a speaking part!

Starring role

Many of us would love to be natural raconteurs who can hold an audience captive with engrossing, witty antidotes. Yet not everyone can be a Stephen Fry.

In fact, it can often be the case that you make more of an impact by allowing others to have a greater speaking part. For many, getting the other person talking is a successful way of getting good contacts as you learn a lot about the other person, you don't have to do the talking (so you're not thought of as boring) and the person doing all the talking feels important and remembers having a good time in animated conversation with you.

What do you do?

It helps if you have prepared an answer to this that succinctly details and shows the benefit of what you do: "I'm a partner with the law firm Brown, Braun and Bidden and I help companies minimise their tax". Be prepared to give further information if people want it and speak animatedly about your work.

Business cards can be exchanged at any time: either early in the conversation as an ice-breaker or later to show real interest in who you were talking to. Whenever it is offered, hold on to it: that shows interest, plus is a handy way of remembering a name.

Escape

There might be other great opportunities to make contacts at the event, so you will have to move on. Try to avoid those old clichés like ‘need to dash for my train’ – a bit weak and a lie if they later find you by the vol-au-vents! Thank the other person, say that there are other people you must catch up with, get their card if it is of interest to you and move on politely.

Follow up

After a successful night’s networking, it will have been a wasted night if you don’t follow up. Consider sending out a handwritten note within 48 hours. Emails get lost amongst the 300 other emails your contact may receive that day, whereas a note looks more personal and has greater impact.

A lawyer I trained told me: “Before I used to mill around, and not achieve anything. But now after a party, I’m shattered! I go there to work and now get much more from these types of events than I ever used to”.

Lastly, bear in mind that a clever person knows lots of things; but a successful person knows lots of people. And as the recession takes hold, that becomes more important than ever.

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