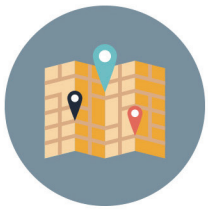
Turning Contacts Into Clients: Five Tips to Help You Network Your Way to Success

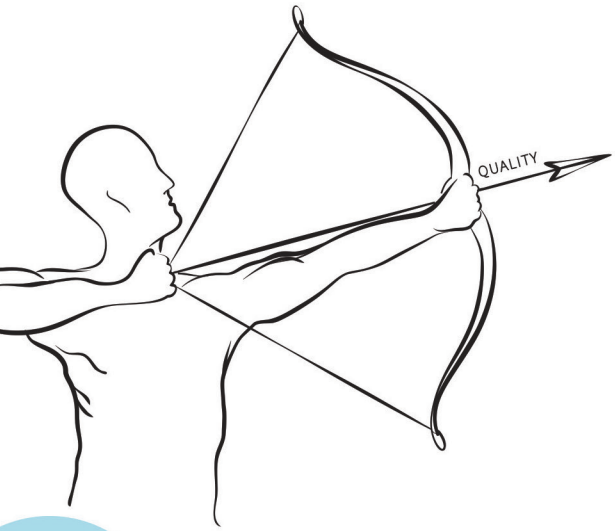


By Terrie S. Wheeler, MBC

As a lawyer, you make your living by delivering exceptional service and expertise to your clients. It is likely 80-90 percent of your new business comes through referrals from satisfied clients and other professionals. Because of this, your ability to create and maintain your professional network is essential to the ongoing success of your practice. While some lawyers have a natural ability to network, most find it helpful to have a few proactive strategies to connect with others and turn their contacts into clients!

Five Tips to Succeed in Networking

Having worked with lawyers for over 25 years, I have seen first-hand what really works in nurturing relationships that ultimately lead to referrals. The following five tips come directly from best practices I have seen work for hundreds of lawyers across the country.



#1 – Quality Is More Important Than Quantity

With the increasing demands of building a law practice and keeping clients happy, it is extremely important to spend your networking time wisely. Review the people with whom you are networking to ensure you are making wise choices. One of the best ways to ensure you are networking with the right people is to review where your best referrals have come from in the past. What traits and characteristics do they have in common? What industries are they in? Do you receive referrals from other lawyers, accountants, financial advisors, consultants or bankers? Create criteria around what your best referral sources have in common, and then focus on using your personal and LinkedIn contacts to ask for introductions to those you want to meet. If you organically build a relationship through someone you know, you will not violate your state's non-solicitation rules.

#2 – Focus on Asking Questions, Not Selling Yourself

The purpose of a networking meeting is to find out about the person you are meeting to determine if the individual should become a closer connection of yours. After the meeting is scheduled, think about the questions you will ask in your meeting. The purpose is NOT to sell your service during a networking meeting. Rather, networking is about how you can help others (and in turn, they will want to help you). Ask them questions about themselves and their businesses. You can typically find some great background information on a person by conducting some research online before your meeting. You can easily learn where they went to school, what their hobbies are, what type of practice they have and what connections you have in common. Use that information to get the conversation started in a way that will build rapport. Then continue to ask them questions and listen carefully to their responses. This will enable you to leave the meeting with a better understanding of the person – and whether or not you see them as a possible trusted referral source for you and your clients in the future. This leads right into the next tip….

#3 – You Must Like & Trust Your Referral Sources

Remember, networking is the process of creating a trusted group of professional advisors – for the mutual benefit of both parties. Your purpose is to determine if the person with whom you are meeting is someone you would feel confident referring to your clients, friends and colleagues. Consider developing a list of intrinsic questions you can ask yourself about the person you are meeting to help you determine whether or not they would be a good personality and expertise fit. Examples include: Do I like this person? Are they smart and possess good knowledge of their trade? Do they value relationships and building their base of professional contacts?

The bottom line is you should leave a networking meeting knowing if you would actively refer the person to your friends, family and professional colleagues. If not, they are not a good referral source for you to develop.

#4 – Follow Up & Follow Through

After your meeting, if you have decided you would like to continue the relationship, it is extremely important to follow up with them. Develop a process you will follow after each networking meeting. Consider a process that includes: creating a LinkedIn request for your new connection and adding them to your contact management system, including as much personal and business information about them as possible (so you don't forget the subtle details that drew you to them in the first place). Schedule a reminder on your calendar for two months out to reconnect. If you promised to send follow-up information or offered to make an introduction for them – do what you said you would do. If you don't follow up with promised information, you will lose credibility.

#5 – Continue to Build & Develop the Relationship

Real trust doesn't begin to develop in a relationship until after the third or fourth meeting. While you can usually determine whether or not you like someone in the first meeting or two – actually trusting them with a client of yours will take longer. But remember the re-

verse is also true – that it will likely take your new potential referral source the same amount of time to develop that same level of trust with you. Creating a plan for continued communication is very important. Your plan can be as simple as adding them to LinkedIn and continuing to post status updates that will add value to them, emailing articles you come across online that they would be interested in. Follow them on social media and engage with their posts by reading and commenting on them.

With time, practice and planning, your networking efforts will pay off by delivering consistent, high quality new referrals your law practice depends upon to grow. Networking is the key to your success in private practice. Become a student of networking by applying the tips above so you can successfully turn your contacts into clients and referral sources.

Terrie Wheeler is the founder and president of Professional Services Marketing, LLC. Terrie has spent the last 25 years as an in-house marketing director, marketing consultant and marketing coach to lawyers and law firms. She currently teaches marketing at three law schools and serves on the Minnesota Lawyers Board of Professional Responsibility. If you have a marketing question, contact Terrie at twheeler@psm-marketing.com, or via telephone at (320) 358-1000.