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The Strategic Networker

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THE STRATEGIC NETWORKER

By Cynthia Sharp, The Sharper Lawyer

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Most solo and small firm practitioners have had some degree of success in attracting new clients; otherwise, their firms would already be defunct. But most do not strategically plan business development activities and instead just let things happen organically—especially in the networking arena.

Building and implementing a strategic networking system will improve a firm's bottom line as all efforts will be in service of a game plan that is focused toward developing relationships with potential quality clients or referral sources. The following suggestions, designed to produce long-term results, can be implemented immediately.

1. As you create your marketing plan for 2017, decide how many hours per month you are willing to devote to networking. Then, carefully choose networking venues based upon organizations frequented by potential clients or referral sources. Random acts of marketing certainly lead to random results whereas focused activity ultimately leads to predictable results.
2. Prepare for the networking event. Use social media or other resources to research the background of any scheduled speakers, board members, and other key people who may be attending. Connect through LinkedIn, Twitter, or email prior to the event, letting them know that you look forward to meeting. You have now warmed the atmosphere for an in-person encounter.
3. Be ready with potential questions and conversation points. If attending an association meeting, take a quick look at the website so that you are up-to-date on the organization's current events and publications as well as news about the members. For example, an estate planning attorney who did her homework ahead of a recent meeting of the local Estate and

Financial Planning Council was able to break the ice with an accountant by complimenting him on a recent newsletter article and to congratulate a banker on a recent promotion.

4. Be prepared with an “Elevator Speech,” which is the answer to the eternal question: “What do you do?” Because the “speech” should be designed to elicit genuine interest and not boredom, the initial answer should be succinct (and not 30 seconds as many marketers have recommended in the past).
5. Instead of hanging out with others from your office or social group, be sure to mingle. The purpose is to establish and deepen business relationships.
6. Engage fully while conversing. Glancing around the room, at your watch, or your cell phone sends an unattractive message to your conversation partner. Many lawyers (and other adults) have unfortunately not mastered basic social skills. Be sure that you’re not one of them.
7. Make it a point to introduce yourself to people you don’t know, especially if they look shy and alone. A good opening question is: “What is your connection to this event?”
8. When the time comes to move on to a new conversation partner and you are finding it difficult to pull away naturally, simply say: “I would like to mingle a little more but have thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. May I please have your business card?”
9. The most important and neglected aspect of the networking process is “The Follow Up.” Immediately after a networking event or conference (usually before leaving the premises), I take a snapshot of the business cards given to me. Using Evernote, the image is sent to my virtual assistant along with instructions to add the contact information to our marketing database and to record the appropriate follow up action (i.e., send a letter, schedule a lunch date, or other specific action).

In order to keep yourself accountable and to measure results, each step of the process needs to be documented. If you would like a complimentary copy of the tool that I personally use: The Networking Maximizer, please email me at cindy@thesharperlawyer.com with your request.

10. An ancillary benefit of business networking is that your social circle will most likely be expanded. Most of my friends are people that I met in a business context.

Many approach networking events as if they are attending a social gathering—arriving late, leaving early, and viewing the venue as a place to chitchat while eating and drinking. On the other hand, the Strategic Networker holds the mindset that networking with purpose will lead to an increased bottom line and plans his actions accordingly.

Cynthia Sharp

Business development leader and veteran attorney Cynthia Sharp, Esq., works with motivated lawyers seeking to generate additional revenue for their law firms. The business development strategies and skill sets that she shares were developed and tested over a period of 30 years in practice and are constantly refined to reflect modern marketing techniques. For additional information about business development issues, check out thesharperlady.com.