

How to network

Jim Lawless advises on how to maximise your networking opportunities and spend more time building new business relationships than eating cheap canapés

DOES THIS SOUND familiar? You arrive at an event where you know you could do some serious networking. You know there are probably 20 people in the room whom you would benefit from talking to, and who would benefit from talking to you. But you don't know who those people are; everyone seems to be wrapped up in their own conversations and when you do eventually manage to break into a conversation, you find it is with the wrong people and you have no idea how to back out of it again.

With the prospect of becoming a partner set to turn into reality next year, bringing in new business and making their presence felt in the firm will be on the minds of many legal executives. A successful lawyer brings work into the business; that's a key difference between a partner and an associate. Most lawyers will acknowledge (albeit grudgingly) that marketing is part of the job, and those who bring work in are rewarded, both financially and in their career progression. Attending networking events is one incredibly useful way to meet people and potentially win their business.

For many legal professionals, the idea of 'selling' is almost distasteful. But selling need not be about smooth-tongued tricks and techniques. If you think of it as making friends with people, discovering their problems and agreeing to solve them for a fair fee, it is less distasteful – and less intimidating. And these are all things that, as a legal executive, you already have the skills to do.

Business networking events are a fantastic opportunity to get on with this key task. All business people have problems, and often these will have a legal implication. Our problem is, of course, that very few people actually relish business networking events, and meeting strangers can be pretty daunting.

Here are 8 golden rules to make your networking more successful and less of a trial:

Go with a purpose and a plan

Work out what in advance what it is that you want to achieve and why you are going. Have a clear plan about what will make the event a success for you. Instead of being in a fluster at the event, concentrate on achieving the business goal.

Remember that everyone is in the same boat

Everyone in the room can become shy and nervous. You can solve that problem for them. Just walk up to someone and start a conversation. They will be delighted to speak with you.

Don't make it complicated

Don't feel that you have to demonstrate your brilliance within five minutes of meeting someone. Take the pressure off of yourself. There are myriad simple topics you can start with. Start with a question. Ask for their opinion. It can be about the venue, their company, the presentation you saw, who they think will win the football, even the buffet. You don't have to think of a clever opener.

Be quiet

Don't just talk at people; ask questions, and listen to the responses. Not talking all the time will make you seem relaxed and at ease, and if you seem genuinely interested in people, they will warm to you.

Be happy

It's easy to start a conversation based on whinging. People will join in, but they won't take away a warm memory of you. You can make a better impression by being positive.

It's OK to say hello

Saying hello is the easiest way to start a conversation. Just walk over, smile, say 'hello' followed by your name, smile and hold out

your hand confidently. It is the easiest way to open a conversation and it never fails. They will answer with 'hello' and their name (unless they are very nervous and, if so, probably very glad to see you) If it is a formal occasion, you might want to say the name of your firm after your name, but otherwise, you can start simply and bring that in later. This might sound obvious, but ask yourself: do you actually do it?

Don't be too polite

If you find after five minutes that the people you are talking to really are not the right contacts, then don't feel obliged to stay and talk to them for the next 20. It is OK to politely excuse yourself from the conversation. A simple 'excuse me' is all it takes – this is a networking event after all and you are expected to talk to more than one person. Try to excuse yourself at a point where you have just said something, rather than the other way round, so they will not feel that they have bored you.

Business cards don't have legal problems – people do

Have you ever been to a networking event and collected a wallet full of business cards? Did it earn your firm a fee? Everyone has found themselves in this situation and it is a result of having no plan or goal in advance. Don't just go around collecting cards – it's lazy and pointless. Find out about people and their business needs. Can you help? If you – or someone in the firm – can, make an arrangement to discuss it further straight away.

That's right, – agree an action over a coffee. If you can solve their problem, they will be glad to make a date. Wouldn't you?

Becoming a confident networker and making these events work for you can take time, especially if approaching strangers and opening conversations do not come naturally to you. But if you keep practising, and keep following the rules, then you will soon find that you can make these events work for you. When you start to bring in clients, the momentary awkwardness will seem worthwhile.

Jim Lawless is a former City solicitor, a conference speaker and director of training company ZooBites. See www.jimlawless.com

