Out of the Box Networking Tips

by Lori L. Lorenzo

Networking is increasingly more important to law students’ job searches. In some cases, a student’s aptitude for meeting people, carrying on a conversation, and following up with professional relationships can make the difference between being employed at graduation and being desperate. For some students this ability comes naturally; for others the process is terrifying, mysterious, or even painful. Here are a few suggestions to share with students for whom networking is difficult.

**Talk to Strangers**

This is not advice your mom would give, but it is an essential skill for networking. For some reason lawyers and judges occupy in the minds of law students the same realm of awesomeness that superheroes hold for my 5-year-old son. Not that lawyers and judges are any less valiant than Captain America, but they are somewhat more approachable. For students who are intimidated by lawyers or just scared to start a random conversation, I suggest they build their comfort level by going out alone once a week and talking to at least two people. Talk to the guy sitting next to you at the bar, the cashier at the grocery store, or the fitting room attendant at your favorite store. For most people talking to strangers gets easier with practice.

**Join Groupon**

Face it, students are so busy studying and lamenting over legal writing assignments that they become pretty boring by the end of first year. I encourage my students to join Groupon and do one or two things each semester. It is important that they try new things, whether it’s a new restaurant or a new workout. Groupon events won’t break the bank but will broaden the student’s social horizons. There is no better way to start a conversation than “I tried this really great Parkour class last week.” You don’t have to know anything else about Parkour to be the exciting person who tries new things. Remember, academic credentials being equal, the candidate who is interesting and easy to talk to gets the job because no one wants to work 18 hours a day, six days a week, with a colleague who has the personality of a pet rock.

**Learn about Improv**

Successful improv follows rules. Two of the rules are also applicable to networking. First, always start with “yes.” Accept any statement or comment as true and proceed with your contribution in response. Starting your response with “yes” encourages the person to whom you are talking to continue to contribute to the conversation and, even if your “yes” is followed by a statement of dissent, you don’t seem condescending or argumentative. Second, there are no mistakes, only opportunities. So what if you got the firm’s name wrong. It’s not great that it happened, but it happens. If you make a mistake, apologize briefly but sincerely and then move the conversation forward by asking about the proper pronunciation or the firm’s practice areas. Improv is fun to watch because most of us just aren’t that quick on our feet. Similarly, the ability to move graciously past a mistake or social faux pas is rare, and those who possess the ability are not soon forgotten.
Read a Dating Book

With tips like be prepared, know what you want, look your best, be interesting, work with what you've got, and don't take yourself too seriously, the world of dating has plenty of good advice to offer to networking novices. Ultimately both have the goal of building relationships. In networking, as in dating, it's important to know what you expect out of a particular networking event, to brush up on your current events so that you can contribute to the conversation, to look your professional best, to accentuate the positives (and leave the negatives out of the conversation) and to simply relax and enjoy the opportunity to meet new people.

Networking can be intimidating, overwhelming, and exhausting, but it's a necessary skill in today's job market. Moreover, establishing good networking skills early in one's career can open doors in practice for business development, lateral movement, switching practice areas, or even leaving practice altogether. Only a select few are born with natural networking skills. For the rest of us, the old adage holds true: practice makes perfect.

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