

## Getting Through the Door

By Sharon Berman

In my work, I meet seasoned lawyers who are world-class at what they do, but who shy away from networking, reluctant to enter a venue to mingle with unfamiliar people. For this reason, while they may want to penetrate a certain industry, these professionals find reasons not to attend an industry-related conference. Similarly, they may be interested in meeting and networking with professionals who can refer them business, but they are simply too uncomfortable in these situations to attend valuable meetings and mixers.

Most of us have these same feelings to some degree. Occasionally, I meet that unusual person who really thrives on walking into a room of people they've never met before, but that really is the exception. The people who look like naturals are usually those who have learned techniques that help them ease past their mental barriers. Putting these into play, we can learn how to move past the anticipation of being uncomfortable that can keep us from attending business development meetings and events.

Over the years, I have learned techniques to go beyond my comfort zones. In addition, attorneys and other professionals have shared with me the obstacles they've encountered and what they have done to overcome them. While it's important to know how to network, it's critical to learn how to take the initial steps to go to places where such networking can happen.

### Play to Your Strengths

Know yourself. Assess and leverage your strengths, and play to them. For instance, if you are a morning person, then focus on



breakfast or lunch meetings. If your energy is higher later in the day, consider lunch or evening events instead. It's difficult enough to push past your comfort zones without adding the challenge of going against the grain of who you are. This doesn't mean that if you are a morning person and want to target a group of, let's say, food-industry professionals who have dinner meetings, you shouldn't try to get there. However, when you have a choice, align your activities with your strengths.

### Know Your Limitations

What about those of us who have personal obligations? For instance, if you need to drive your children to school, you may have to rule out early morning meetings, which will narrow your networking choices and thus make your decisions easier.

Another point to consider is whether a networking opportunity is geographically desirable. As much as you can, focus on meetings that are an easy commute, as opposed to those that cause you to fight rush-hour traffic to travel across town. When there is a less geographically desirable meeting that you'd like to get to, put it on your calendar and block out enough time to allow for minimal stress in getting there.

### Time Yourself

Give yourself a time goal. You needn't stay for the whole meeting. If you plan to go, you will want to take advantage of the networking time, which is usually before the program starts. You can make a pact with yourself to stay for an hour or even start with 30 minutes. Chances are that once you get to the event, you'll stay longer. The important thing, though, is to walk through the door.

There are professionals who attend events solely for the pre-program networking. I once heard of a mediator who built her practice by only going to the networking portion of bar association or related meetings. She never stayed for an entire event. You, too, can discreetly leave when the meal starts or after the salad.

### Make an Investment

Pay in advance. Many attorneys make sure to pay entrance fees in advance because they know doing so will increase the likelihood of attending. For others, paying in advance has only a minor influence on whether or not they actually get there.

### Bring Someone Along

Use the buddy system. You are surrounded by colleagues, referral sources and clients who would be pleased to attend a specific

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networking meeting or conference with you. There are many who have the same hesitation about attending a meeting, but who would like to go. They will never get there unless someone invites them. The next time you consider attending an event, but feel that frisson of discomfort, consider others who would benefit from this meeting. Whether they can attend or not, you'll earn kudos for inviting them. The caveat is that you have to agree not to sit together and must talk with others at the meeting.

### Think Positive

Ignore self-defeating thoughts, which may include:

"I'm too old to have to do this." In this economy, many experienced lawyers find themselves in a place where, for perhaps the first time in years, they must expand their network. Perhaps you think that at this point in your career, you shouldn't have to be out networking. The truth is that today's world is different. We have to reinvent ourselves and keep learning. There is more than one lawyer out there who has seen an established network crumble and must now build a new one.

"There is already an attorney who has roots in the organization." This concept applies to industry groups and trade associations that you may want to target. Please do not let this fact intimidate you or stop you from attending a meeting. Every industry or trade organization has an attorney who has been participating for a while and serves as the speaker on legal issues, for example. That doesn't mean, however, that there isn't room

for you. Not everyone may like the aforementioned lawyer or even believe that he's good at what he does. There is usually room for one more if you are willing to make the investment of time and effort that this attorney has made.

"Everyone will think I'm a vendor and that I will try to sell them my services." This, too, can apply to industry or trade-association venues where you are the only one or only one of a few lawyers. You know that you're not there to do a hard sell. You're there to talk to people, learn and start building relationships.

Instead, have this liberating conversation with yourself:

"I'm going to this meeting to learn and explore." Coming from this perspective can alleviate a lot of pressure. If your goal is to go to the meeting with the primary purpose of learning, you will find that it's a lot easier to talk with people. It may be that you want to learn about the current challenges in the industry, a new technology or what's new in securities litigation. Think about what you want to do with the information. You may want to blog about what you learn, write an article or call a client or referral source to discuss. This approach encourages you to demonstrate interest in those you meet by expressing your curiosity and genuine interest.

### Role Play

"Be the host." The one technique that will make you feel more comfortable than anything else once you walk through the doors

is to act as if you are the host and that it's your job to make other people feel comfortable. If you were hosting this event, you wouldn't let anyone stand in a corner looking uncomfortable. Instead, you'd reach out to that person and pull him into your group. Although you're entering the room for the first time yourself, play this role. Reach out to someone who may be as uncomfortable as you are and begin a conversation. Play the host and then continue reaching out to others. After all, it's your party. Enjoy!

As you embark on your networking activities, be mindful that you will likely feel uncomfortable until you've attended the same organization's meeting more than once. Once you clear the hurdles of the first few meetings, however, the initial discomfort will be worth it. By the second or third time you attend an event, you'll see familiar faces, and people will recognize you. From that point on, things will become much easier.

Also, be aware that it can take a push to get past any feelings of discomfort, and I use the word "push" deliberately. Sometimes, you have to push yourself as though someone literally had a hand on your back and gave you that final shove to enter the room. Then, once you've attended that first meeting, regardless of its outcome, you'll have a strong sense of accomplishment and be ready to do it again. ■

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