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Inexpensive Ways To Build Business Relationships

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Selling legal services is all about relationship building. Since legal consumers hire attorneys who they trust (either directly or because someone they trust has made a referral), it is not difficult to see that building relationships is the best way to build a law practice.

While this may seem like a simplistic assertion, the mechanics of relationship building are anything but simple. It is one thing to know that you want to build relationships with human resources professionals (to generate employment law work) or bankers (to generate lending work). It is quite another thing to actually make this happen.

So what are some of the ways that you can build relationships that will lead either to business or business referrals? In this article, I will offer guidelines for relationship building and provide you with 47 ideas that you can put to use right away.

12 Guidelines For Relationship Building

1. Become a great listener. Commentary: If you want to succeed at building business relationships, try listening 80 percent of the time. Active listening is a great way to gain trust. It is the best way to find out how you can be helpful to potential clients and referral sources.

2. Be genuine. Commentary: If you are a strong believer in gun control, don't congratulate someone for the award they received from the National Rifle Association.

3. Follow up quickly. If you meet someone at a networking function and decide you want to get together with them, call or e-mail them within 24 hours to set something up. Commentary: Quick follow-up increases the chance that you will actually do it. It also increases the chances that the contact will remember you. Following up right away does not mean that you have to meet right away.
4. Don't get involved in activities that do not interest you. Doing things because you "should" will not work. If you don't like golf, don't play golf.
5. Avoid activities that do not feel comfortable or appropriate.
6. Relationship building takes time and cannot be rushed or forced.
7. Find out about people's interests by asking open-ended questions. For example: "What do you do for fun?" "Where are you going on vacation?" "What are you doing for the holidays?" or "What are you doing this weekend?"
8. If you meet someone in their office, you can get a lot of clues about their interests. Just look at what they have on their walls.
9. When reading articles, read with intention (Is there anyone I can forward this to? Is there anything in this article I can discuss with my clients or contacts?)
10. Find out ways to be helpful by asking: "What is keeping you up at night?"
11. Get in the habit of following up on small things right away. Timely thank-you notes are much more meaningful than cards that arrive three months after the fact.
12. While politics and religion can be very poor topics to discuss with a stranger, common political and religious beliefs can be a very strong source of connection. Commentary: the recent election is a good illustration of this.

47 Relationship-Building Activities

The list below is intended to stimulate your own thinking about relationship building. Some of these ideas will work for you while others will not seem appropriate. Stick with what feels right.

You will also note that many of the items on the list below have nothing to do with business. While business relationships can be built on purely business interests, personal connections are likely to build stronger bonds.

1. Send notes of congratulations. Commentary: If you get in the habit of reading industry publications, you will become more aware of what your clients are doing.
2. Help someone's family member with a job search. Commentary: If job notices come across your desk, forward them to people who might be interested. Introduce the family member to a client of yours. Even if the client does not have a job for the individual, they can help the individual by providing contacts and other useful information about their industry.
3. Refer business to them. Commentary: One of the best ways to generate business referrals is to make referrals yourself. Be sure that the referrals you make are "quality" referrals (quality as defined by the person who is getting the referral).

4. Introduce them to someone who can solve a problem they have. Commentary: Perhaps they need a good computer consultant to help set up an office network or a good plumber to unclog their sewage line at home. Either way, referring good vendors to your contacts shows that you are resourceful.

5. Introduce them to someone who you think they should meet. Commentary: Perhaps you know an accountant who does work for a company they are courting. The accountant can give them useful background information about the company. Maybe you know someone who has dealt with a similar business issue and might be willing to share his experience.

6. Participate in a charitable cause that is of interest to a potential client or referral source. Commentary: Only get involved on an ongoing basis if you care about the cause yourself.

7. E-mail an article to them. Commentary: Keep track of people's interests in an electronic contact manager so you can match articles with people's interests. Many online publications make it very easy for you to forward articles by e-mail. If you take the time to track people's interests in your contact manager, you are more likely to remember that person when something of interest does come across your desk or your computer desktop.

8. Invite their comments on an article you are writing. Commentary: If it makes sense, ask several people for feedback. You will end up with a better article and by asking, you will be communicating that you value their opinion.

9. Invite them to a sporting event. Commentary: Make sure it is a sport that you like and a sport that the prospect likes.

10. Do great work for clients and celebrate any victories.

11. Send holiday gifts. Commentary: When possible, try to make the gift personal or at least choose something you think the individual will like.

12. Invite them to a reception at your firm or ask them if they want to join you at someone else's reception.

13. Ask about their spouse and children. Commentary: A wedding ring is a good clue that they are married. If it feels appropriate, ask them what their spouse does. If you happen to be in their office, ask if the pictures on the walls are their kids.

14. Go on a dog walk together.

15. Lend them a book you enjoyed.

16. Co-author an article with them.

17. Invite them to participate on a panel with you.

18. Establish a common connection. Commentary: same school, town, common professional or personal contacts

19. Teach them something about a non-legal subject that you know something about (e.g., how to use a piece of office technology; good places to vacation in Ireland; how to find a reputable dog breeder).

20. Write a personal note on any form letters you send out.

21. Plan an activity with your children (if they have children the same age).
22. Send acknowledgments if you see that they are mentioned in the press.
23. Send congratulations on significant life events (e.g., births, weddings).
24. Send condolence cards when you learn about a death in their family. Commentary: Most people will really appreciate this. It is unlikely that you would offend someone.
25. Recommend a good movie, book, play or other cultural activity.
26. Introduce them to a hobby or activity that you are passionate about.
27. Recruit them to participate in a nonprofit cause that interests you (make sure they seem genuinely interested).
28. Go out and celebrate with the client after settling a big case or closing a big deal.
29. Take the time to learn about their interests.
30. Mention their name as a source to a reporter.
31. Send them a brochure for a seminar that might interest them.
32. Tell them about a website that might be helpful or interesting to them.
33. Respond to business announcements they send out. Commentary: People generally appreciate feedback after they send out a mailing, particularly if it is marketing literature. If you liked something about the mailing, let them know.
34. Send back comments about an article they have sent to you.
35. Follow up on a referral you made and ask how it turned out. Commentary: if you think the person you referred actually followed up
36. Let them know about your significant life events.
37. Call the person you gave a referral to and ask them if the individual or company was able to help them.
38. Thank them for referrals and thank them again if the referral hires you (or keep them posted).
39. Invite them to your dance, piano or choral recital or the opening of your photography exhibit.
40. If a family member of theirs is sick, call to ask how the family member is doing.
41. Pay a condolence call if a parent dies and/or attend the funeral. Commentary: Unless you have good reason to believe that the person does not want to see you, showing up is likely to be appreciated.
42. Come to their functions when they invite you.

43. Put all of your time on your bills and show a discount (or indicate "no charge" for certain activities).
44. Call or write to send compliments about something good you've seen or read about the company/client.
45. Start a discussion by e-mail about a common interest (e.g., politics, sports).
46. Attend a presentation that the contact makes and send a note or a comment about the presentation.
47. Find out what organizations they are involved in and join one that interests you.

If you make a point of trying to be helpful to the professionals in your network, your relationships will grow. Whether you use any of the suggestions above or find other ways to connect, relationship building will lead to business if you stick with it over a long period of time.

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