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Networking at Christmas Time

By **Jack Downton**

Christmas seems to come earlier and earlier each year. Supermarkets start selling Christmas puddings in September, department stores are decked with tinsel before Halloween and 'All I want for Christmas' has been dominating the radio since Bonfire Night.

I expect some of you may feel you have had your fair share of the holiday season. So does the thought of another work-related Christmas party fill you with dread? Whilst some lawyers have a natural gift for 'working the room', many dread networking events and would rather kiss Aunt Mildred under the mistletoe than talk to a room full of strangers. Yet networking can prove a great opportunity to put you in contact with people that may just come in useful – both now and in the years ahead.

Preparation

Many lawyers that we have trained are surprised to learn that preparation is the key to success to becoming a successful networker: a little bit of homework now can pay big dividends later. Just as planning and foresight is needed for your day to day work, networking too greatly benefits if you have in mind objectives of what you want to achieve. By simply turning up, you don't have a focus, and so you could find yourself standing on your own, eating mince pies and achieving little. Research who might be there in advance and give thought as to what you want get out of the evening and you will probably find yourself leaving with lots of useful business cards.

Look the part

To impress a crowd at a corporate event, you will need to create the right impression. As you arrive, it is worthwhile checking your appearance in a mirror before you enter the room. People can form an initial impression within 10 seconds of meeting someone, so having arrived in a hurry straight after work is no excuse for not looking presentable.

As you enter the room, smile and make eye contact with those in the room. This is engaging, gives you an aura of confidence and gives the appearance of approachability. Have in your mind some suitable 'ice breakers' to kick start conversations: the amount of people at the event, the size of the room, or even how your Christmas shopping is going, so long as you can initiate the conversation if you have to.

Choose your target

When choosing who to approach, consider carefully who to move in on – those on their own might be on their own for a good reason; similarly, a clique of two might not be welcoming to a

third party. A group of three or more might be the best option. Approach with eye contact the member of the group you judge as leading the conversation. Don't hover and hope to be absorbed. Approach purposefully, smile and say something like 'May I join you?'

In conversation, use people's names as soon as you hear them. If names are not offered, don't be hesitant in asking for people's names, as asking for names too late in the conversation is often awkward.

Before discussing the type of law you're involved in, or the firm where you practice, use small talk to earn people's trust and establish that essential initial rapport. Similarly use questions to show a genuine interest in the people you're talking to. Use their answers to inform your next question.

In your group, however, avoid any temptation to monopolise conversation. In fact, allowing others in the group to have a greater speaking part than you can prove a terrific way of getting contacts. By giving someone a greater role, you learn a lot about the other person, you don't have to do the talking (so there's no chance of being thought of as boring) and the person talking feels important and remembers a lively exchange with you. The message above all others when networking is 'Be interested; don't try and be interesting'.

Also have prepared an answer to the inevitable question: 'And what do you do?' Prepare an answer that succinctly details and shows the benefit of what you do. Be ready to give further information if people want it and speak with enthusiasm about the work that you do.

My card...

Business cards are an important step in the process and they can be exchanged at any time - either early in the conversation as a way to initiate dialogue, or later on to show an interest in the person to whom you were talking. When a card is offered, resist the temptation to put it in your pocket: keep hold of it in your hand. It shows a respect for the person, plus it will come in handy should you forget their name.

There might be other great contacts to meet at the event, so you will have to move on. Try and avoid clichés such as 'must go - need to catch my train'. Honesty is always the best policy - especially if they then later find you talking to someone else and the 21.02 to Norwich left long ago. Instead, thank the other person while looking at them in the eye (not over their shoulder as you cast around for someone else to speak to), and move on confidently, yet politely.

After the event, you need to follow up, or else your night may have been a waste of time. Instead of sending just another email, consider posting a handwritten note, possibly with an article attached you think may be of interest them. It looks more personal and has greater impact.

Lastly do bear in mind that these events can also prove a great way of making not just business contacts, but friends you can call upon for a whole variety of reasons. So good luck, have fun and enjoy the Christmas period.

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