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Networking for barristers

By **Jack Downton**

For some barristers, the upcoming series of Christmas parties means a chance to develop business opportunities by meeting potential clients. For others, however, the demands of Christmas might mean the last thing you want to do is attend yet another corporate event. Yet these can prove a great opportunity to network – something that has become an essential part of being a modern-day barrister.

Developing new business opportunities through networking is a difficult area for more traditional barristers, who find this ‘self-promotion’ uncomfortable and stressful. Yet those who don’t seize the opportunities for meeting potential clients in such a way run the risk of losing out to those barristers that do get out there and network.

Luckily, networking is merely a skill and with a few tips, and some practice, all barristers can improve the way they approach these events.

Preparation is all

Preparation is the key to successful networking, and just as you would with an important case, networking should similarly be treated with the requisite preparation. Arriving at an event without a focus and no goals in mind will often lead to a wasted night, whereas having clear objectives of what you want to achieve will likely lead to leaving with a handful of useful business cards.

Before, you should prepare an answer to the inevitable question “And what do you do?” that illustrates the benefit of what you do, not merely the features. Therefore, an answer such as “I’m a barrister with Leamington Chambers and I help clients in contract disputes” reveals more than just a job title and invites people to ask more about your work.

Be interested, not interesting

Before you start to discuss your chambers or your recent cases, use small talk as an invaluable way of gaining people’s trust. Have in mind some ice-breakers to kick start conversation: the location of the building, the art work on the walls, anything that initiates dialogue.

Letting those you meet do more of the talking is often the best way of starting a successful relationship. The key lies in asking questions to show a genuine interest in the other person, careful and attentive listening, and taking your next question from the answer you get. They will leave with the impression that you are really interested in them and consequently, with a good impression of you.

Escape

You will probably want to meet other people at the event, and so at some stage you will want to move on. Business cards can be exchanged at any time: either early in the conversation as a way of introducing yourself or later as a way to cement an interest in the person you were talking to. Having asked for their card, hold on to it rather than putting it straight in your pocket or wallet. It shows respect, interest and is a great way of remembering a person's name. Thank them and be honest! Say there are other people you must catch up with, and move on firmly yet politely.

After a successful night's networking, follow-up within 48 hours, ideally with a handwritten note which has more impact than any email.

Clerks

Lastly, don't forget your clerks. They can play a major role in building your business: they have lots of influence and it is their responsibility to make sure clients get placed with the right barristers. They should meet as many potential clients as possible and therefore should network whenever they can. As Lee Tyler, Head Clerk at 2 Temple Gardens said:

“In an increasingly competitive market I believe it's vital the clerking team equips itself with the necessary skills and confidence to actively market chambers and to make the most of any opportunities that arise. Our recent half day networking skills programme with The Influence Business really helped us all, especially in difficult areas such as breaking into groups and then being comfortable to move on.”

So good luck and enjoy the Christmas party season.

Jack's advice is to be taken into account with regard to the Bar's Code of Conduct.

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