

This article first appeared in The Brief in July 09.

How to win friends and influence people

By **Jack Downton**

The need to influence people will never change. In fact, it's all the more important during a recession when holding onto a client (or poaching one from under a rival's nose) might secure the reputation of your firm.

However, for many lawyers, entering a room full of strangers and trying to strike up a potential working relationship via a polite conversation doesn't sound like the perfect evening. Most of the lawyers I train, however, are surprised to learn that a few simple tips often means a much more successful evening.

Just as you would with that important client brief, it's a good idea to have some knowledge of the likely scenarios for the evening: forewarned is forearmed. Ask yourself what you want from the evening, who you most want to talk to, and what you would like to gain from that relationship: know who's going to be there before you walk through the door.

'Do you come here often?'

It is said that a first impression is made within the first ten seconds of meeting someone, so a smart appearance is essential. So as you arrive, it is worthwhile checking your appearance in a mirror before you enter the room.

When considering who to approach, be careful – those on their own might be on their own for good reason. Similarly, two people engrossed in conversation might not welcome your addition. A group of three or more however might be the best option, and you should approach making eye contact with the member of the group who seems to be leading the conversation.

Before you start to discuss the type of law you're involved in, use small talk to gain people's trust and ask questions to show interest: "How far did you have to travel to get here?"; "What do you think of the sculpture in the lobby?"

Get familiar

Once you've established the basis of a potential working relationship, then it's time to exchange details. Use people's names as soon as you hear them. If names are not offered, ask because leaving it too late might prove awkward. Give firm handshakes and introduce yourself by giving your name. It's a good idea to make sure your business cards are up-to-date – you don't want to spend all evening handing cards to dozens of potential clients only to arrive home and discover that everyone now has your old phone number (I've even been handed a card by a client from his old company).

Don't be tempted to thrust that new card straight into one of several deep pockets either; it looks dismissive, and it's a certain way to make sure you immediately forget that person's name. Instead, keep it in hand to confirm your interest in that person as an individual, not just another potential client.

There might be other great opportunities to make contacts at the event, so you will have to move on. Try to avoid those old clichés like ‘need to dash’ – a bit weak and a lie if they later find you by the vol-au-vents! Thank the other person, look them in the eye, say you’ve enjoyed talking to them and that there are other people you must catch up with. Get their card if it is of interest to you and move on politely.

The morning after

After a successful night’s networking, it will have been a wasted night if you don’t follow up; put in a call or consider writing a handwritten note for maximum impact. Emails get lost amongst the 300 other emails your contact may receive that day, whereas a note looks more personal and has greater impact. One way to make sure that person takes notice of you is to send them an article which might be of interest to their business.

A lawyer I trained told me: “Before I used to mill around, and not achieve anything. But now after a party, I’m shattered! I go there to work and now get much more from these types of events than I ever used to”. So at that reception on Wednesday you’ve been dreading, walk in with a smile and a purpose; your firm’s reputation depends on it.

Jack Downton is the managing director of The Influence Business Ltd (www.TheInfluenceBusiness.com). He is a former colonel in the Royal Marines. You can email Jack at Jack.Downton@TheInfluenceBusiness.com