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Navigating the World of Networking: Five Quick Tips for Women

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Networking struggles are certainly not unique to women. Both men and women often feel unprepared to effectively network early on in their careers. Recently, we each started our own practice, which has forced us to face steep learning curves on networking and business development. It has also made us question whether, as women, we face unique issues, challenges, or biases when networking. Do women network differently than men? If not, should we? While we do not propose to provide definitive answers to these questions in this short article, we offer the following tips based on our experiences in an effort to help other women lawyers who may also be trying to learn to successfully network.

FOCUS ON DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

You have probably heard it said that the key to networking lies in developing relationships. We agree and think that the strong interpersonal skills that many women possess can be their most effective networking tool. People respond to authenticity and while it sounds like a cliché, being yourself is important. There is no magic to developing relationships in the business context—it requires being engaged, finding common ground, and listening well. People will respond to you, and remember you, as a person first. They might not need a lawyer with your expertise right away, but down the road when they do, they are more likely to remember you when you've made a genuine connection.

LET GO OF THE FEELING OF BEING “TOO PUSHY”

We have noticed a tendency amongst some women to hold back on marketing themselves for fear of being perceived as ‘too pushy’. Yet, there is a difference between being inappropriately pushy and appropriately confident about your abilities and the quality of your service. Learning to recognize the difference may take time and experience. But remember that people are busy and will often forget about the service you provide unless you remind them. That’s not being pushy; it’s being proactive.

Also, stop second-guessing yourself. Sometimes we leave a networking event or potential client meeting and question what we said or how we said it. It may take time to feel confident about what you can offer but the more you own your skill set, the easier it will be to present that without self-doubt.

POUNDING THE PAVEMENT AND GETTING YOURSELF OUT THERE

Admittedly some nights you would rather curl up in your pajamas in front of the television than go to another event, but the power of face-to-face networking cannot be understated. Unless you're very lucky, it will also require repeated, ongoing efforts. The key is to find a way to network that is right for you. Not everyone wants to go to a hockey or basketball game. Nor does everyone want to have a one-on-one lunch. It may be through charity work, attending conferences, and/or involvement in professional organizations. Try to find ways to make new contacts and retain established ones that works best with your personality so that you do not simply find reasons to avoid doing it altogether.

LEARN TO LIVE WITH SOME AWKWARDNESS

With that being said, many useful networking opportunities require us to attend events where we may not be particularly comfortable. For example, we may know few, if any, of the attendees at a conference. Yet, such events are important to expanding your network. Learn to live with a little awkwardness now and again and challenge yourself to step outside your comfort zone. If you are an introvert, Catherine Brennan of the OBA included some excellent tips in her article for the Winter 2015 JUST Magazine, "[Fake it to Make it: Networking for Introverts](#)".

SO, YOU WANT TO ASK A MAN OUT FOR COFFEE....

Many women have expressed to us some level of discomfort in networking with men, at least in one-on-one situations like coffees or lunches. We do not dismiss this concern as we know women who have had to deal with inappropriate advances or comments by men in these situations. Yet, it would be unwise to avoid one-on-one time with any potential business contact, man or woman, based on the negative experiences of a few. Men are also looking to make professional connections. There is nothing inappropriate about a business lunch or coffee with a man and, in fact, one-on-one meetings provide excellent opportunities for professional relationship-building. If it does end up being uncomfortable, do not put up with inappropriate behaviour out of fear of losing a potential client or referral source; instead try to divert the conversation back to business, or simply find an excuse to leave.

CONCLUSION

Networking can be challenging for us all. Women do seem to face at least some unique challenges and there are interesting articles written on the topic. For our purposes, we hope that the above tips taken from our experiences so far will help women assess (or confirm) what is working and what might be holding them back in developing and expanding their networks.

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