

Building Business Relationships in a Time of Social Distancing*

A Webinar Sponsored by the Boston Bar Association, New Associate's Forum, May 12, 2020

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[Seckler Legal Recruiting and Coaching](#)

Thank you, Daniel Fishman, and thanks to the New Associates Forum for inviting me here today. I also want to thank the Boston Bar Association more generally. It is not easy to run a professional association in this climate and the BBA is doing a great job of keeping us all connected.

These are challenging times and I hope all of you are finding ways to make the best of a very difficult situation.

I also want to compliment any of the younger attorneys who are joining us. Relationship building is like any kind of investing. The earlier you start, the greater your returns. So, thinking about this now will pay big dividends in the future.

It is ironic that I'm doing a webinar to talk about building business relationships. Relationship building is something that works best in person. We get to know people through the informal conversations we have at work, at school, through volunteer work and in social settings. Through these interactions we get to know, like and trust other people. This is harder to do when we can't be in the same room together.

Unfortunately, in-person encounters are off the table for a while.

The good news is that there is still a lot we can do, even in this time of social distancing. We still have effective ways to build our existing relationships and even begin some new ones. Our increased familiarity with virtual tools and comfort in using them is helping to bridge the gap. Our collective struggle with the stress brought on by the pandemic means that people are more open than ever to connecting on a personal level. People are looking for connection.

Before I begin, I just want to say that I would be happy to talk with any of you after this session is over. Just email me at legal@seckler.com and we'll find a time to speak by phone or set up a Zoom session. I always enjoy having the chance to help lawyers with their careers or with their marketing and honestly, that is much more rewarding to me than just giving a presentation. In fact, that is really the main point I want to make today—

Even in these times of social distancing, find ways to have real conversations with the people in your personal and professional networks.

So Here is our agenda for today:

- Why build business relationships?
- What relationships should you be building?
- What are the barriers that YOU face?
- Then we'll get into Practical tips for building your network
- Finally, I'll talk about Relationship building in a time of social distancing

Before we dive in, let's see who is in the audience. Please respond to the poll on your screen:

- Attorney with 0-5 years of experience
- Attorney with 6-10 years of experience
- Attorney with 11+ years of experience
- Law student

Why Build Business Relationships?

I'd like to start with a few quick stories—

- [TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBORS]---Until the start of the quarantine, I was spending a lot of time in coffee shops. A few months ago, I walked into a local Starbucks and sat down to do some writing. I began logging on to my laptop and when I looked up, I noticed someone I recognized sitting in the corner. He was the father of one of my son's friends from college. They had played ultimate frisbee together and in fact, they had actually played together in high school.

I had spoken to him a few times on the sidelines and ran into him a few times at my local gym. I thought for a moment about whether I should bother him on a Sunday morning; but I like him and decided to go for it.

I walked over and asked him how his son was doing. He told me his son was interviewing for a position with an executive search firm, so I offered to help his son prepare. We then both remembered that our daughters were also in college together and chatted about that for a few minutes.

I then asked him how things were going at his new company. He is the CEO of a life sciences start up and he had recently left a very successful commercial stage company. Within a few minutes, he told me that they are thinking about hiring a general counsel. He gave me his email address and told me to make an appointment to meet him in Cambridge to discuss his GC search.

Two weeks later (and 8 years after we had first met), I began working on a search for his new GC.

- [DO UNTO OTHERS]--My second story is about a friend of mine whose legal career has spanned many industries. Right out of law school, he worked for a major law firm. He became a partner and after 12 years, he decided to go in-house.

His first stop was at a publishing company. He then moved into a role at a financial services company. After that it was a dot.com and then a large international retailer.

Finally, he became corporation counsel to a very large biotech company.

What is noteworthy is that he came to the biotech company with almost no experience in the industry. He's a very smart individual and a great lawyer; but he was an outsider. So how did he make that transition? The short version of the story is that over a period of a decade, he had built a relationship with the GC. They actually met long before she even went in-house and had kept in touch as each of them changed jobs. When she was still in private practice, he had met with her to talk about life in-house.

When she was looking for corporate counsel at the biotech, she reached out to my friend despite his lack of industry experience. She knew him, liked him and trusted him. You can hear more of his story on my podcast, Counsel to Counsel.

- [IF YOUR COLLEAGUES LEAVE]--Finally, in my most recent podcast interview, I spoke with a member of the senior management team at a major international firm. She had spent many years at the US Attorney's office in New York prosecuting high profile crimes. When it was time to go back to private practice, she connected with a former colleague who thought very highly of her.

Before she left the US Attorney's office, she was on a part-time schedule and did not want that to change. But because her former colleague had great respect for her, she was able to negotiate a p/t schedule on the way in the door. She had negotiating leverage because of the relationship she had built at the US Attorney's office and was hired as a part-time partner. You can hear HER story in the latest episode of my podcast.

I start with these stories because they illustrate an important principal. In law school, you are rewarded for effort. Do the work, perform well on the test and you get an A.

In the real world, working hard and doing a good job are of course important. But they are insufficient. The associate who sits in the back office churning out great briefs doesn't necessarily advance to partnership. The partner who becomes a great technician doesn't necessarily generate new business for the firm. And the star counsel who sticks close to the office doesn't necessarily get the great in-house job.

Relationships matter once you leave school and the sooner you start building and expanding your relationships, the easier it will be to advance your career and build a practice as you get more senior

What relationships should you be building?

We'll talk a shortly about how to build relationships but let's start with a list of the people who may be in a position to help you at some point in the future. Most of these are pretty obvious but I'll list them anyway.

- [PARTNERS AND ASSOCIATES] The obvious suspects are the partners and associates you work with.

These are the people who will become most familiar with your work. They may end up in-house at some point or at another firm. If they end up in-house, this may be your entrée to an in-house job down the road. Lawyers who go in-house also need to hire outside counsel and they often look back to their former colleagues when they need law firm support. They may become your clients in the future.

- [PARALEGALS, ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPPORT STAFF]—Then there are paralegals administrators and support staff

Many of these individuals will also end up working for other employers and they can become good sources of introductions or intel. I just spoke yesterday to the Director of Talent Acquisition for a mid-sized firm. She made a lateral move a few years ago from another major firm. Within two years of arriving at the new firm, a couple of partners contacted her to explore a lateral move because they were unhappy with their firm management. The Director played a key role in helping them vet the new firm.

- [CLIENTS AND THEIR SUBORDINATES]—Next on the list are clients you work with. As an associate, these may not be your clients right now; but if you are working with their subordinates, these individuals may move at some point and become YOUR clients someday. Now is the time to get to know them.
- Keep in touch with [LAW SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CLASSMATES AND PROFESSORS]
- Get to know the [PEOPLE YOU MEET THROUGH BAR ASSOCIATIONS, OTHER ASSOCIATIONS, NON-PROFITS, COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES AND HOBBIES]

It's a long list and when you are early on in your career, it's hard to know where to focus. But as a junior associate, it doesn't really matter. The goal is just to build your business relationships when there is not a lot of pressure. Take the time to get to know the people you come in contact with. Get in the habit of connecting. Learn about people on a person level. You never know when someone you meet is connected to another person you want to meet. As you get more senior, it will become more obvious where you want to focus your energies but for now, make some time for this.

What are the barriers you face in building business relationships?

What I'd like to do now is get your input. Please take a moment to send a message through the chat and identify your own obstacles. Daniel Tillman from the BBA will highlight anything I miss.

First here is my list:

- You are Too busy
- You Don't know who to approach
- You Don't feel comfortable in social situations
- You Don't know what questions to ask
- You Don't want to come across as a salesperson
- You Don't feel comfortable going to networking functions

In my opinion, big networking functions are not a great place for most of us to build new relationships and I'll say more about that shortly.

If you are an introvert, here is some good news:

- Introverts are often better listeners and that is key to building relationships

Daniel, can you read out any barriers I may have missed?

Practical Tips for building your network

Let me start by saying that networking is not something that comes naturally to me. But I've learned to not only embrace relationship building but to enjoy it. Like many of you, I've had to overcome some obstacles.

I often joke that my autobiography will be called Birth of a Salesman.

My father was a math professor and my mother was a school psychologist. In my household, the highest value was placed on hard work and academic achievement. My father didn't think much of people in business. He called them *operators*.

After law school, I began to realize that hard work only gets you so far. If you want to advance in your career and build a practice, you need to build relationships with people who can help you.

I work for myself now. But I've had three permanent jobs since law school. In each instance, I got the interview because someone who KNEW, LIKED and TRUSED ME helped me get in the door.

As a recruiter and marketing coach, I've generated lots of business and numerous referrals through relationships I've cultivated over long periods of time.

What I've come to realize is that I actually enjoy relationships building. I'm not a glad hander who enjoys large networking events where I don't know a lot of people.

But I do truly enjoy getting to know other people. For example, I'm not really a sports fan, but I enjoy learning about sports by talking to other people who do. I did a blog post entitled "[If you don't Like Sports, try Becoming a Sports Fan Fan.](#)" Ask a question about someone else's favorite team and then shut up and listen.

You can be successful at this just by being interested in other people. It's not about being pushy or trying to sell anything.

In fact, relationship building shouldn't be about you and what you want or need. Healthy relationships are a two-way street. That is true in your personal life and it is true in business.

I'd like to share some general tips which are applicable in "normal times". I'll then address what to do while we are stuck at home.

1. [RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TAKES TIME]-- You are not hunting, you are farming. Get to know the people you meet over time. Relationship building works best if you don't "need" anything. Do it as a habit. You can't predict now how relationships will help you in the future. All of the examples I gave in the beginning involved relationship building over many years.

Find ways to be helpful. And come back to the same people. Having one conversation by phone after you meet someone at a networking function is not really relationship building.

2. [IT'S A MARATHON NOT A SPRINT]--It's much better to spend a few minutes every day or every week than it is to wait until a rainy day to reach out. Make relationship building a habit and always be looking for opportunities to connect.

3. [BE A GREAT LISTENER]—people like to talk about themselves. The only way to find out how you can be of help is to listen.

Regardless of what you thought of his politics, Bill Clinton was great at this. He was described as an aerobic listener in the book Primary Colors. He had the capacity to make EVERYONE in the room feel heard.

As a rule of thumb, try listening 80% of the time.

4. [BE INTERESTED; BE INTERESTING]—Being a great listener is very important. But have something to talk about as well. If someone asks you what is new, answering with "not much" or making some generic statement about COVID, doesn't really extend the conversation. Be prepared to talk about something interesting in your personal or professional life.

5. [BE AUTHENTIC]—Be authentic and choose activities you like as a way to meet more people. If you don't like golf, don't play golf. Find some other way to spend your time. Look for volunteer or social activities that give you the chance to connect with other people who care about the same things or enjoy the same activities. Obviously, our choices are more limited right now but that will change.

And since you won't click with everyone, look for the people who appreciate you. I can work well with a broad mix of personalities. But I work particularly well with people who have a similar dark sense of humor.

6. [FIND WAYS TO BE HELPFUL]—As I've already said, if you want to be successful at networking, you must keep in mind that it really isn't about you. It's about building relationships—and relationships aren't one-way streets.

There are lots of ways that you can be helpful to other people.

Here are some examples but there are many more in some of the articles on my website:

- Send notes of congratulations and thank you's
- Recommend a good movie
- Refer them to another professional who can help them with a business or personal issue
- Refer a client to them
- Offer to speak with their high school junior about your alma mater
- Flatter them
- Answer a simple legal question
- Send notes of condolence

In the Fall, paid a condolence call to a professional friend of mine. I then spoke to him a few months ago when I had a death in my family. He told me how much he had appreciated the fact that I had showed up.

After the webinar, the BBA will circulate a handout with links to some articles that will give you more examples. You can check out my website for more resources.

7. [CREATE USEFUL CONTENT]—This is a good time to write articles, blog posts or start a podcast. While these are marketing activities and not relationship building, they can become relationship building in a number of ways. For starters, you can send the article around for comment before you publish it or get input from clients or colleagues before you write it.

Once the article or blog posts are written, make sure to circulate them to people in your network who might be interested. This reinforces your connection.

In thinking about what to write, think about the common questions your clients are asking.

When I decide to do a podcast, I choose topics that I think will be of interest to my audience. But I also choose guests who I want to get to know. I find that interviewing people actually helps build my relationship with them.

8. [USE GOOGLE ALERTS]—Use Google alerts to keep tabs on your clients (and subjects that interest you). That will give you more reasons to connect with your network.

9. [FOCUS ON SMALLER GATHERINGS]—Meeting people for coffee or getting involved in a committee is a better use of your time than going to large events. This is even more true when live meetings are not possible. In general, it is hard to connect with new people at large events.

If you happen to know a lot of people, large events can be a way to reinforce relationships. For example, a reunion is a place where you are likely to see a lot of people you already know.

I attend gala events when I know I'll run into a lot of lawyers I know. But even then, I keep my expectations low.

I tend to get more out of bar association committee lunches and meetings with my business networking group ProVisors.

I get the most out of having coffee with one or two individuals.

10. [BE PERSISTENT; BUT AVOID FATAL ATTRACTION]

Connecting with other professionals takes some persistence. While it is better to have smaller number of strong business relationships, you need to do a lot of outreach if you want to have meaningful conversations. You may have to contact three or four people just to have one conversation.

If you want to get to know a client better, don't give up after one attempt. Try contacting people through different means. Send an email. Follow up with a voicemail message. Give it at least three tries.

Do understand that many people will never respond. Don't take that personally. Move on. Circle back several months later. Mark it in on your calendar. Many people are just too busy to respond to networking requests.

11. [KEEP NOTES IN OUTLOOK OR A GOOD CRM]

It's a really good idea to keep notes about the people in your network. Remembering how many children they have, what sports or movies they like, where they grew up or any number of personal details about them is key. If you have a bad memory like me, this is essential. But even if your memory is pretty good, this will enable you to quickly find the people who might appreciate an article you want to forward.

Tips in a Time of Social Distancing

Finally, let's turn to the real challenge we all have right now. How to do this remotely. The good news is that we have options. Here are my tips.

1. [FOCUS ON EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS]—It's harder to build brand new relationships in this environment so focus on strengthening existing relationships and build out from there.
2. [BE COMPASSIONATE] Stefanie Marrone, a legal marketing consultant, said it well.

The most important thing you can do right now in these uncertain times is to be more human and be patient. Lead with empathy. Understand that everyone is on edge right now. Let others know that you're really in this together and you also share their anxieties.

Stefanie Marrone Consulting

3. [GET TO KNOW COLLEAGUES AND CLIENTS ON A PERSONAL LEVEL]— This is incredibly important in developing long-term, loyal relationships and it is actually easier to do right now. People have a lot on their plates and in my experience, they are more open to sharing. Get to know your colleagues better. Check in with clients to see how they are doing. I'm finding that lately, I'm spending a lot more time speaking about home schooling kids, elderly parents, cancelled vacation plans and the uncertainty of COVID. I spoke to someone yesterday who was holding a toddler in her profile photo. When she flipped on the video, I found out that she is a grandmother.
4. [BE AWARE OF YOUR OPTICS] If you are using Zoom or some other virtual platform, be aware of the optics. There are lots of articles on this and I'm happy to share if you need some resources on this. I included one in the handout you will be receiving.
5. [DON'T FORGET THE TELEPHONE]—Zoom has opened up a lot of conversations for me in a way that wouldn't have happened by phone. There is a higher level of connectivity when you can see someone. But not everyone likes Zoom so give people alternatives. The phone is still an important relationship building tool.
6. [SHARE CONTENT OF VALUE]—While sharing content is important in normal times, it is especially important in these times to supplement the conversations we are having. Share articles. Present webinars. This is all part of keeping up your visibility. You can even share articles you didn't author (if you think they would be appreciated by someone.)
7. [SHORTER CONTENT IS BETTER] If you are going to do some writing, shorter content is actually better. I've heard GCs complaining that law firms are bombarding them with long treatises about COVID. Be a curator and make it easy for people to digest. Break complex legal analysis into several blog posts or updates.
8. [SOCIAL MEDIA IS PART OF YOUR TOOLKIT]—Social media is one way to stay visible, but it is not a substitute for direct communication. Post your own content. But share other people's content as well and make sure you have a good profile. I'm happy to talk to anyone more in-depth about LinkedIn and how to use it effectively .

9. [BE PROACTIVE] While the focus will be more on strengthening existing relationships, it is still possible to create new relationships, but you have to know who you want to meet. It is also important to leverage existing relationships and get introductions.

I joined a virtual bar association event a few weeks ago and was very impressed with one of the speakers. It was a relatively small event and I'm friendly with the chair of the committee that sponsored it. I reached out to her through the chat and asked her if we could connect by Zoom or phone. In my message, I referenced the chair who I know.

So, look for small virtual events that enable you see the attendees. Find people in the mix and ask them to connect.

If there is a presentation, I find that presenters are good people to approach. That's where flattery can be helpful!

I'd like to open the floor for questions. If you have a question you'd like to ask, please type it in the question and answer box at the bottom of your screen.

Also, as I said at the beginning, I would be happy to set up a time to speak with you by phone or by Zoom to discuss your specific concerns.

I'll conclude by saying that relationship building can be a lot of fun and a nice diversion from the day-to-day practice of law. If you are a people person, the benefit can simply be that you get to know some more people.

While we are all still quarantining, we can't meet in person. But there are still many ways to stay visible and to connect if you take advantage of the tools that are available.

*for more information or to get copies of the slides or a link to the audio portion of the webinar, please email me at legal@seckler.com

