

Building Your Business Relationships Through Religion, Politics, and Humor

By Stephen E. Seckler

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Being a great lawyer is necessary if you want to achieve success in the profession. But having strong legal skills is insufficient. If you really want to build your practice, the relationships you develop are critical. Potential clients and referral sources need to know, like, and trust you. This doesn't happen just by drafting beautiful contracts, memoranda, or pleadings. It happens by building a strong network.

So, what are some good ways to build your network? How do you build meaningful connections with other professionals?

What I've come to realize over the years is that when I find something in common with another individual, it is easier to build rapport. Sometimes that thing is professional (we do similar work, we have similar clients, we are interested in the same subject matter, etc.); but more often, the thing we have in common is more personal in nature.

I connect well with people who enjoy the same music (classic rock, folk rock), the same hobbies (playing guitar, playing squash), the same movies (stories about dysfunctional families, parody, documentaries), the outdoors, the same podcasts (*The Daily*, *Stay Tuned with Preet*, *Fresh Air*, *The Hidden Brain*, *Freakonomics*), etc. While I don't care much for organized sports, I do genuinely enjoy speaking with individuals who are passionate about their sports (see my blog post "[If You Don't Like Sports, Try Becoming a Sports Fan Fan](#)").

Are there any interests I don't mix with business? Conventional wisdom says that religion and politics are bad topics to bring up with people you don't already know. Humor is also risky when you are trying to cultivate business relationships.

With some significant caveats, I disagree.

Tribalism and Networking

I'll get to that in a minute, but first I want to underscore that fundamentally, as human beings, we are all tribal. We like to belong, and we like to identify with groups that we belong to. Looking for these connections should be a conscious part of your efforts to build your professional network.

For example, be on the lookout for:



- 2 Fellow sports fans (e.g., Red Sox Nation—need I say more?)
- 3 People who live in the same community.
- 4 Individuals who have worked for the same company.
- 5 Individuals who grew up in the same place.
- 6 People who have played the same sport.
- 7 People who vacation in the same place.
- 8 The parents of your children's friends.

And what if you have the same religious upbringing or share a common set of political beliefs?

Religion and Politics

Religion and politics create some of the strongest ties between people. The challenge is how to bring up these topics without offending.

In my case, I live in a pretty liberal part of the country, so it's not that risky to make a disparaging comment about the 45th president. But if I don't know someone well, I usually give them an opening by bringing up the topic in a neutral way (e.g., "I heard that the January 6 Commission is going to start holding public hearings") and see how the person reacts. If that person calls it a witch hunt, I know it's time to move on.

Also, by just being a good listener, people will often give you clues about their political beliefs. If you ask a lot of open-ended questions when you meet someone (think direct examination), you can learn a lot about them and then decide how to proceed.

The intersection of religion and politics is particularly fraught. For example, I have a strong Jewish identity and feel a strong sense of connection to other Jewish professionals, particularly those from New York who share my dark view of the world. (*It's no use, the universe is expanding!*) But my views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tend to lean to the left, and I stay away from that topic in certain circles (although if I know someone shares my views on the subject, that is a strong bond that ties us).

Religion and politics are highly emotional, and that is why they are great sources of identity for most of us. Unfortunately, we are living in a country with a lot of polarization. But when we can establish (in a safe way) that someone shares our belief system, we have a bond that goes even further than rooting for the same sports team (although that can be like a religion), graduating from the same law school, growing up in the same town, or liking the same music. We can use this polarization to our benefit.

Finding shared experiences, interests, or beliefs makes the conversation flow. It increases our feeling of being connected to someone, and ultimately it increases the likelihood that we will like and trust that individual (and vice versa). Sharing common political or religious beliefs can greatly increase that likelihood.

In fact, there is one theory that organized religion developed as humans moved from nomadic existence where everyone knew each other to cities where you couldn't know everyone. Being part of the same religious faith and practice was one way to know that someone was trustworthy.

Humor

I've saved humor for last, but humor is one of my greatest interests. I love parody. I love sharing cartoons with people in my network. My list of all-time great movies and TV shows includes *Dodgeball*, *This is Spinal Tap*, *Bridesmaids*, *The Hangover*, *Talladega Nights*, *Borat*, *Best in Show*, *Wayne's World* (my first date with my wife), *The Big Lebowski*, *Groundhog Day*, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (religious parody!), *The Office*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, to name a few. I frequently quote these movies and shows when I'm talking to my clients and my business contacts.

Earlier this year, a client told me he hired me because he heard me speaking on a podcast about how I like to write parody lyrics. He liked my advertisement for Verizon (*Sign Up Now for Verizon*—sung to the tune of Bruce Springsteen's title cut *The Rising*—his homage to 9/11 and New York).



When I get a coaching prospect laughing, I generally know that is a good sign.

But humor can really backfire, especially on Zoom.

About a year ago, I was giving a presentation to senior lawyers about making a career transition. I was talking about some of the things that people do in retirement, and I showed a PowerPoint slide of an elderly couple playing a video game together. I told them it was called *Kill the Nazis*. (It wasn't!)

Let's just say that this didn't go over well, and I didn't generate any coaching assignments from that presentation (or any follow-up inquiries).

Being Your Authentic Self

If you try to use religion, politics, and humor in your business networking, you are bound to offend someone along the way. At the same time, you'll find people who want to work with you and spend time with you because they can see you are not afraid to be authentic. But be particularly careful on virtual platforms where it is hard to read facial cues and gauge reactions.

You are paid as a lawyer to be a trusted advisor. If you want to engender trust, be your authentic self. If sharing your political or religious views is a turnoff to some prospects, you'll make it up by finding the clients who really appreciate you. Similarly, if you can figure out an appropriate way to use humor to connect, you'll be laughing all the way to the bank!

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