

Persistence, Follow-Up, and Avoiding Fatal Attraction: Tips for Building Your Network

By Stephen E. Seckler

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I sent an email a week ago to a former client who moved to another company. I didn't get any response. Do I send another email message? How long should I wait? What should I say?

I met a potential referral source at a networking event last fall. We spoke by Zoom two weeks later, had a nice conversation, and then nothing happened. When should I contact her again?

Effective follow-up is an issue that I work on with almost every client I meet. Whether I am coaching lawyers who are trying to build their practice, counseling lawyers on their next career move, or helping lawyers to develop better leadership skills, follow-up is something we always discuss.



If you want to be successful in your legal career, it is important to develop great legal skills. But being a great technician is insufficient. Building a strong professional network is just as important. Communicating effectively with your colleagues is critical. And if you want to build your network, persistence and follow-up are essential.

Respond to Emails Within a Reasonable Amount of Time

I've always made a habit of responding to email messages within a day (even if just to say I'm sorry but I'm busy right now and will try to get back to you next week—or something like that). While I don't always live up to this standard, I believe it is common courtesy to acknowledge that someone is trying to communicate with me (unless they are simply trying to sell me something).

While I consider responding to emails in a timely fashion the professional thing to do, I recognize that some of the people I am trying to reach are overwhelmed and simply don't have the bandwidth to respond.

Auto Replies Can Help Manage Expectations

Many lawyers make effective use of auto replies to deal with this problem. They set the expectations so the sender at least knows the message was received. If you do use an auto reply, a best practice in my opinion is to give the sender the name of someone whom they can reach out to if their matter is time sensitive. Some lawyers I know—generally more senior attorneys who are more old-school—have an administrative assistant monitoring their account so that time-sensitive matters are addressed quickly.

More often, I find that people in my network who are busy simply don't respond at all.

Even knowing that many professionals are simply too busy to respond, it is hard not to take it personally when someone ignores you. But there are many reasons why emails you send may get no response.

For starters, email has been proliferating at an exponential rate since it became the dominant form of business communication in the late 1990s. The sheer volume of email that most professionals receive in a day is daunting, and it is only growing.

It is also important to remember that there are many other reasons why you may not be getting a response when you email someone.

Spam Filters Are a Problem

Spam filters are getting a lot more aggressive in weeding out unwanted solicitations from our in-boxes. It is incumbent on us all to check our spam folders daily. I've been seeing more and more legitimate email ending up there. (For more, see the *GPSolo eReport* article "[Protecting Yourself Against Protecting Yourself Against Spam.](#)")

There is also "user error" at play. In the old days, when you sent a letter, you had a physical envelope that went in the mail. With email, however, failing to click send or cc the right person means the message won't get delivered, and you may never know it.

In addition, sometimes people have things going on in their personal lives that make it hard for them to respond.

I've had every one of these things happen multiple times in the last few months. I sent a message that the recipient didn't see because he was too busy. I've had recipients who saw a message I sent and forgot to get back to me because they were involved in too many things and my message moved down the queue. Many messages I've sent have landed in spam folders. Some of my recipients thought they had hit send but hadn't, or they replied to the person I wanted them to meet but forgot to cc me. Last week, someone told me that they were dealing with a death in the family and had been out of pocket for a few weeks. They had not set up an auto reply.

Getting Past Spam Filters and Persisting

So what are the best ways to address these challenges? Here is my list:

- If you don't get a response, don't be afraid to send a follow-up email a couple days later asking if the person received your first message. I resend the message with a "cover message" saying: "Just making sure you received my message."
- If the follow-up gets no response, try texting or calling a few days later. You can leave a voice mail message saying, "Making sure you got my email message" or "Just making sure my message didn't end up in your spam folder."
- Unless your matter is time sensitive, wait a few days between follow-ups so you don't appear too aggressive.
- If you have reached out a couple times and there is still no response (and it is a relationship you really want to cultivate), wait a couple months and then send the individual something of value (an article on a subject that might interest them or a recommendation about something they might like personally—[being a good listener](#) will give you clues about that.)
- Each time you reach out, try to change your message a little and, if possible, say at least one new thing (so you don't sound like a broken record).

Most of the time when I do this, the person on the other end apologizes. In the last month, I've received four messages from lawyers who were either embarrassed that they hadn't responded, thankful that I told them to check their spam folder, or apologetic for their own "user error."

Following Up Is Hard for Lawyers

For many lawyers, following up like this is not intuitive or comfortable. Most of us went to law school thinking that we could work hard, deliver great service, and the work or the job offers would follow.

In fact, many of us are reluctant to do this kind of follow-up because we don't want to come across like a salesperson. Being persistent feels aggressive and salesy (and maybe even unprofessional).

If you are trying to build your practice, however, follow-up is crucial. Legal services are generally big-ticket items that people don't need all the time. If you want prospective clients and referral sources to think of you when a problem arises, you need to be visible over time. One phone call or one email message will not create the ongoing visibility you need.

If you are in a job search and you are using networking as one of your strategies (highly recommended from this coach, who also spent 25 years recruiting in the legal space), the people you are trying to reach may have less incentive to respond even though most people like to help. (Practice tip: when reaching out in a job hunt, mention the name of the person who introduced you or, if you can, get the person who made the introduction to send the first email.)

Is it possible to overdo it with your outreach? Of course. Sending the same email message five times in a month will not reflect well on you. But in my experience, this is rarely the problem. Just the other day, a client of mine reached out to a few law school classmates who were now in corporate roles (i.e., prospective clients). He hadn't spoken to them since graduation, which was more than ten years ago. But as I reminded him, [it's never too late to renew your college ties](#).

If you have any questions about how you can make your own communications more effective, particularly if they are more in the realm of marketing communications, please email me. I check my spam folder daily! And I promise to get back to you within 24 hours (unless I'm on vacation, in which case you will get an auto reply).

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