



## **A Guide to Networking for Attorneys** (rev. 9/11/26)

*How to Build Professional Relationships That Advance Your Career and Grow Your Practice*

Networking is one of the most important skills an attorney can develop. It can help you find career opportunities, learn about different areas of practice, build a book of business, become more visible within your profession, and develop relationships with people who can provide advice and support throughout your career.

But the word networking creates the wrong image for many attorneys.

It can conjure up a crowded reception where you are expected to walk around introducing yourself to strangers and handing out business cards. For attorneys who dislike self-promotion or consider themselves introverts, that can be particularly unappealing.

Fortunately, that is only one small part of networking.

The most effective networking is really about relationship building. It is not about collecting contacts or asking people for favors. It is about developing professional relationships through curiosity, generosity, consistency, and mutual support.

And it generally happens gradually.

A person you meet at a bar association program may eventually become someone you have coffee with. Later, you may serve together on a committee. You may send that person an article, make an introduction, or invite them to participate in a program. Eventually, that person may send you business, tell you about a job opportunity, introduce you to someone you should know, or simply become a trusted professional friend.

Relationships grow layer by layer.

### **Why Networking Matters Throughout Your Legal Career**

Networking is not something you should begin when you suddenly need a job or a new client.

Your network is a professional asset that you build throughout your career.

For an attorney considering a career change, your network can help you learn about other career paths, identify employers, understand what particular jobs are really like, obtain introductions, and uncover opportunities that may never be widely advertised.

For an attorney in private practice, relationships are at the heart of business development. Writing articles, speaking at conferences, participating in professional organizations, and maintaining visibility on LinkedIn can all enhance your reputation. But trusted relationships are what ultimately lead to many business and career opportunities.

Your network can also help you inside your own organization. Colleagues can become advocates, mentors, sources of information, collaborators, and sponsors for new opportunities.

Good work matters. Expertise matters. Reputation matters. But in a profession filled with capable people, relationships often determine who gets called, recommended, hired, referred, or invited into an opportunity.

## **Start by Changing Your Mindset**

One reason attorneys resist networking is that they think it requires them to ask other people for something.

Try reframing it.

*Instead of asking: What can I get from this person?*

*Ask: What can I learn about this person, and how might we be helpful to each other?*

That shift makes networking feel less like selling and more like something most attorneys already know how to do: gathering information, listening carefully, identifying issues, and developing relationships.

Think like an investigative journalist rather than a salesperson. Be curious. Ask good questions. Listen. Look for common ground. And listen for opportunities to be useful.

This does not mean you should have no agenda. Good networking actually works better when you know what you are trying to accomplish. If you are exploring an in-house career, for example, you may want to learn how attorneys made that transition and what skills employers value. If you are building a healthcare practice, you may want to develop relationships with people who serve healthcare organizations.

Have a goal without making every interaction transactional.

## **Build Relationships Layer by Layer**

One of the biggest mistakes attorneys make is expecting too much from a single interaction.

Relationships usually progress through stages.

You meet someone at a conference, bar association program, community event, through LinkedIn, or through a mutual contact.

You begin to develop familiarity. Perhaps you see each other again, comment on each other's LinkedIn posts, exchange occasional emails, or attend some of the same programs.

Eventually you may have coffee, lunch, or a Zoom conversation and begin learning more about each other professionally and personally.

Over time, you may serve on a committee together, work on a project, attend the same professional group, or participate in a nonprofit or community organization.

You may send an article or podcast, congratulate the person on an accomplishment, remember something important going on in their life, make an introduction, or invite them to something they would enjoy.

Eventually, mutual support develops. You may begin exchanging ideas, sharing opportunities, making introductions, collaborating on professional projects, or referring work.

There is no requirement that every relationship pass through every stage, and the process is rarely linear. The important point is that trust develops through repeated interactions.

When someone eventually refers you, hires you, recommends you for a job, or introduces you to an important contact, it is unlikely to be because of one spectacular networking encounter. More often, it results from the accumulated trust created through many smaller interactions.

## **Know Why You Are Networking**

Before reaching out to someone, ask yourself what you hope to learn or accomplish.

Your objective might be to learn about a practice area, employer, industry, or career path; understand how someone made a particular career transition; identify organizations or people you should get to know; learn about the business challenges facing an industry; develop relationships with potential referral sources; become more visible in a particular professional community; reconnect with people you have lost touch with; or learn how you might be useful to someone else.

The more specific you are, the easier it is for other people to help you.

“I’d like to go in-house someday” doesn’t give someone much to work with.

“I’ve been doing employment litigation and counseling work with tech companies for six years, and I’m trying to understand what tech companies look for when they hire their first in-house regulatory attorney” gives the other person something concrete to respond to.

The same principle applies to business development. People are more likely to think of introductions for you if they understand the types of clients, industries, and problems that are a good fit for your practice.

## **Start With the Network You Already Have**

You probably know more people than you think.

Your network can include former colleagues, law school classmates, college classmates, clients, former clients, opposing counsel, accountants, consultants, recruiters, professors, neighbors,

friends, relatives, bar association contacts, nonprofit colleagues, community contacts, and people you have met socially.

Your existing network is often the best place to begin, and LinkedIn can be useful in identifying mutual connections and people who already sit one or two degrees away from you.

Don't overlook dormant relationships.

Attorneys sometimes say, "I haven't spoken to her in eight years. It would be awkward to call her now."

Usually, it isn't.

Most people are pleased to hear from former colleagues, classmates, and acquaintances. You don't need an elaborate explanation. Something as simple as "It's been a long time. I saw your recent update on LinkedIn and realized we haven't caught up in years" can be enough to restart the relationship.

You don't need to apologize for losing touch. Just reconnect.

## **Retail Networking Is Often Better Networking**

Large networking events have a role. They can expose you to new people and provide an efficient way to reconnect with many people you already know.

But don't confuse attending events with building relationships.

One-on-one and small-group networking can be especially effective: coffee, lunch, Zoom conversations, small roundtables, committees, and other settings where you can actually talk to someone.

These settings make it much easier to have meaningful conversations, find common interests, and identify ways you can help each other.

That can be particularly important if you are an introvert.

You don't have to become the person who loves working a room. You can build an outstanding professional network one conversation at a time.

## **If You Do Attend Networking Events, Be Strategic**

Large events can still be useful if you approach them intentionally.

Keep your expectations modest. If you attend a reception with 300 people and identify two people you genuinely want to speak with again, that can be a successful evening.

Arrive early, when the room is quieter and people have not yet settled into groups. Look at the attendee list or name tags if they are available. If you know the organizer, ask whether they can introduce you to particular people.

Choose events that make sense for you. If you hate golf, you don't have to play golf to develop business. Go where you are genuinely interested in the activity, subject matter, organization, or

people. And of course, select events where you are most likely to meet potential referral sources, clients, or other professionals in industries or professions that interest you.

When entering a conversation, look for someone standing alone or a group that is relatively easy to join. Ask questions and let the other person talk first.

And don't try to meet everyone.

The objective is not to accumulate business cards. It is to identify a few people with whom you might want to continue the conversation.

## **Be Interested**

Before meeting someone, do some homework.

Review their LinkedIn profile and professional biography. Look at their organization's website. Find out about their work, career history, industry, professional activities, and, when possible, some personal interests.

Then ask open-ended questions.

Depending on the purpose of the conversation, you might ask:

- What led you to your current role?
- What are you working on these days?
- What do you enjoy most about your work?
- What are some of the biggest challenges facing your organization or industry?
- What trends are you seeing?
- How did you make that transition?
- What skills have been most valuable to you?
- What kinds of introductions are helpful to you?
- What else should I be thinking about?
- Who else do you think I should speak with?

The questions should not feel like a deposition. Listen to the answers and let the conversation take its natural course.

Customize your questions so that they feel natural to you, and choose the ones most likely to produce useful information. Listen for ways that you can be helpful as well.

## **Ask About the Person, Not Just the Professional**

Some of the strongest professional relationships are built around things that have little or nothing to do with work.

Sports, music, travel, hiking, skiing, running, books, food, theater, community activities, volunteer work, family traditions, and other personal interests can provide natural ways to build connections.

You do not have to conduct an interview about someone's personal life. Often, simple questions will open the door naturally.

- Do you have any plans for the long weekend?
- Are you going anywhere this summer?
- Did you do anything interesting over the weekend?
- Are you following the playoffs?
- Do you play any sports?
- What do you do when you're not practicing law?

Those questions can reveal an enormous amount.

You may discover that someone hikes in the White Mountains, sings in a chorus, coaches youth soccer, loves jazz, follows the Red Sox, travels frequently to Italy, plays tennis, serves on the board of a local nonprofit, or has children attending the same college as yours.

Those details give you something real to connect around.

The next time you speak, instead of beginning with “How's business?” you may be able to say, “How was the hiking trip you were planning?” or “Did you get to that concert?”

That changes the quality of the relationship.

Personal information can also create opportunities to spend time together. If you both enjoy running, perhaps you meet for a walk rather than coffee. If you share an interest in baseball, you might attend a game. If you both care about the same nonprofit cause, perhaps you become involved together.

The goal is not to manufacture intimacy or collect personal facts mechanically. It is simply to get to know people as people.

## **Be Interesting Too**

Being interested is only half of good networking.

You also have to give the other person something to work with.

One of the most common questions at any networking meeting is: “What's new?”

“Not much.” “Same old stuff.” “Busy.” Those are conversation killers.

Before a networking event, coffee meeting, or Zoom conversation, think of at least one professional and one personal thing you can talk about.

Professionally, perhaps you recently tried an interesting case, published an article, joined a board, worked on an unusual transaction, changed roles, spoke at a conference, or became involved in a new industry.

Personally, maybe you took a memorable trip, started hiking, joined a choir, became interested in pickleball, saw a great play, started playing guitar again, discovered a terrific restaurant, or attended a memorable sporting event.

You don't have to share all of this. You are simply giving yourself choices.

This is particularly useful for introverts and for attorneys who don't like thinking on their feet. A little preparation makes conversation easier.

## **Tell Stories Instead of Reciting Your Resume**

When someone asks what you do, don't give them a practice-area inventory.

"I do M&A, venture financing, commercial contracts, and general corporate work."

Accurate? Yes. Memorable? Probably not.

Instead, give them an example of the kinds of problems you solve.

You might describe how you recently helped the founders of a growing technology company obtain financing or how you helped a family-owned business navigate a difficult ownership transition.

Stories give people something to remember.

Attorneys sometimes struggle with storytelling because our professional training emphasizes precision. But a networking conversation isn't a brief. You can simplify irrelevant details while remaining truthful, and you should always protect client confidentiality.

The objective is to convey the essence of the work and why it matters.

## **Networking for a Career Transition**

If you are considering a career move, networking is particularly valuable because you are trying to gather information before making decisions.

Suppose you are considering moving in-house. Don't begin by asking everyone you know whether they know of an in-house job.

Talk to attorneys who have already made the transition.

Ask:

- What prompted you to move in-house?
- What does a typical day look like?
- What surprised you about the transition?

- What are the biggest differences between firm life and working in-house?
- What skills from private practice have been most valuable?
- What do you wish you had known before making the move?
- What should someone like me be thinking about?
- Is there anyone else you think I should speak with?

Save that last question for the end, when the person may be more comfortable offering introductions.

Notice what you are not asking: “Can you get me a job?”

You are gathering intelligence and building relationships. Opportunities may follow.

## **Look for Ways to Add Value**

One of the easiest ways to make networking feel authentic is to focus on giving.

You don't need to have something monumental to offer.

You can make an introduction, send an article or podcast related to something you discussed, invite someone to an event, share useful information, congratulate someone on a promotion or award, offer your expertise, recommend a restaurant or travel destination, support a cause that matters to them, or simply check in when you know something significant is happening in their life.

Personal interests create additional ways to add value.

If someone tells you they are planning a hiking trip, you might send them a trail recommendation. If they love jazz, you might mention an upcoming concert. If they are taking their family to Vermont, you might recommend a restaurant or town to visit.

These gestures work because they show that you were paying attention.

The point isn't to keep score.

Generosity builds relationships because it communicates something very simple: I was listening. I remembered. I thought of you.

## **Follow-Up Is Where Networking Becomes Relationship Building**

A good networking conversation followed by silence is a missed opportunity.

Send a brief thank-you after a one-on-one meeting. Reference something specific from the conversation. If you promised to send something or make an introduction, do it.

Then decide what the next step should be.

Perhaps you should reconnect in three months. Maybe there is an event coming up that would be a natural reason to reach out. Maybe they suggested someone else for you to contact.

Personal details can also give you natural reasons to reconnect.

If someone told you they were taking a major trip, you can ask how it went. If their child was starting college, you can check in later. If they were training for a marathon, you can ask how the race went. If they follow a particular team, a playoff run may give you an easy reason to send a note.

Don't assume that every relationship requires constant attention. But don't expect relationships to develop without repeated contact either.

And don't interpret silence too quickly as rejection.

Attorneys are busy. Emails get buried. People intend to respond and forget.

A useful standard for follow-up is probable cause. If you have a reasonable basis to believe that someone might be interested in hearing from you, following up again is generally appropriate.

Persistence and pestering are not the same thing.

## **Document Your Networking Like a Lawyer**

Attorneys are excellent at documenting client matters and surprisingly inconsistent about documenting professional relationships.

Use those same professional habits in networking.

After an important conversation, record who you met, when you met, what you discussed, professional information you learned, personal information worth remembering, anything you promised to do, anything they promised to do, and an appropriate next step.

Then calendar the next step.

A spreadsheet can work. So can Outlook, a CRM, or another contact-management system.

The particular technology matters much less than developing the habit.

If someone tells you that their daughter is graduating from college in May, that they spend every August on the Jersey Shore, that they are training for the Boston Marathon, or that they play bass in a community orchestra, record it.

Not so that you can mechanically deploy personal information later, but so that when you reconnect, you have a better chance of remembering what matters to them.

## **Don't Wait Until You Need Something**

Perhaps the worst time to begin building a network is when you desperately need one.

If you suddenly lose your job, decide you hate your practice, or discover that an important client is leaving, you don't want your first thought to be: Who haven't I spoken to in ten years whom I can now ask for help?

If you are trying to build a family law practice, the time to meet accountants, financial planners, therapists, and other professionals who may hear of a need is now. It's not when you are slow.

Networking works best when it is part of your regular professional life.

You don't need to spend ten hours a week doing it.

Have a coffee. Send an article. Attend a professional program. Comment thoughtfully on someone's LinkedIn post. Ask someone how their vacation went. Congratulate someone. Reconnect with a former colleague. Make an introduction. Invite someone to a ballgame, concert, hike, or lunch if you share that interest.

Do a few of those things every week and you are networking.

Small, consistent actions compound over time.

## Common Networking Mistakes

- **Being transactional.** Don't approach every relationship wondering how quickly it will produce business or a job lead.
- **Failing to prepare.** Research the person and think about what you want to learn before meeting.
- **Talking too much.** Curiosity and active listening are more effective than delivering a sales pitch.
- **Being vague.** People cannot help you if they don't understand what you are trying to accomplish.
- **Being boring.** Prepare an interesting answer to "What's new?" and learn to describe your work through examples and stories.
- **Ignoring the personal side of relationships.** If every conversation is confined to work, you may miss some of the strongest opportunities for genuine connection.
- **Networking only when you need something.** Relationships need time to develop.
- **Giving up too quickly.** One unanswered email does not necessarily mean someone doesn't want to hear from you.
- **Failing to follow through.** If you promised an introduction or resource, send it.
- **Failing to follow up.** A single conversation is rarely enough.
- **Failing to document.** Record what you learned and calendar an appropriate next step.
- **Trying to meet too many people.** Quality generally beats quantity.
- **Forgetting reciprocity.** Listen for opportunities to help.

## A Simple Networking Routine

Networking becomes much easier when you turn it into a system rather than something you do when inspiration strikes.

You might set a modest goal each week: have one coffee or Zoom conversation, reconnect with one dormant contact, follow up with several existing contacts, make one introduction, and identify one new person you would like to know.

The precise numbers don't matter. Consistency does.

If you have a demanding practice, even two or three meaningful networking activities a week can add up to well over 100 touches in a year.

More importantly, those activities won't feel like 100 sales calls. They will feel like what they actually are: maintaining professional relationships.

## Sample Outreach to Someone You Know

Subject: It's been too long

Hi [Name],

I realized recently that it has been a long time since we've caught up. I'd enjoy hearing what you've been doing and giving you an update on what I've been up to as well. I'd also like to run a few things by you.

Would you have time for coffee or a Zoom sometime in the next few weeks? I have a lot of flexibility the week of [pick something a few weeks out.]

Best,  
[Name]

## Sample Outreach for an Informational Interview

Subject: Introduction from [Name] / Learning More About [Field]

Hi [Name],

[Mutual contact] suggested that I reach out to you. I'm currently a [brief description], and I'm doing some exploration around [specific area].

Given your experience in [area], I'd really enjoy hearing about your career path and getting your perspective on [specific issue].

Would you have 20-30 minutes for a conversation sometime in the next few weeks? I'm happy to work around your schedule.

Thank you,  
[Name]

## Sample Thank-You

Subject: Thank you

Hi [Name],

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me. I particularly appreciated your thoughts about [specific subject]. Your suggestion that I [specific suggestion] gave me something useful to think about.

I'm going to follow up on [resource/person/action]. I'll circle back down the road and let you know how things develop.

And please let me know if I can ever be helpful to you.

Best,  
[Name]

## The Bottom Line

Networking doesn't require you to become someone you are not.

You don't have to enjoy cocktail receptions. You don't have to become a salesperson. You don't have to accumulate thousands of LinkedIn connections. And you don't have to ask everyone you meet for business or job leads.

You do need to build relationships.

Be curious about other people. Ask about their work but also get to know something about what matters to them outside of work. Share enough about yourself so that they can get to know you too. Look for common interests. Tell stories. Listen. Look for ways to help. Follow up. Keep track of what you learn. Stay in touch. Reconnect with people you have lost touch with. And give relationships time to develop.

Some of the people you meet will never send you business or help you find a job. That's okay.

Others may become clients, referral sources, colleagues, mentors, employers, collaborators, or friends. You rarely know which relationships will matter most when you first meet someone.

That is why the best networking strategy is also one of the simplest:

**Build real relationships, layer by layer, and play the long game.**