Five Tips for Taking the Anxiety Out of Networking

By Jonathan A. Beitner on August 14, 2017 ·

If you are an attorney (or any professional for that matter), you have undoubtedly been told how important it is to “network.” And it is true. Networking—or any other name you want to give for making connections and relationships with people who can help you further your career goals—is essential for everything from developing mentors to getting work and building a book of business. It also promotes social engagement, which is an essential dimension of one’s overall well-being.

But networking can also be a source of anxiety. A recent study commissioned by the American Bar Association and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation found that nearly one in five attorneys exhibited symptoms of clinical anxiety. Almost two-thirds of the nearly 13,000 respondents said they suffered from anxiety at some point in their career.

I’m willing to bet that some of that anxiety was triggered by attempts at networking. Introducing yourself to someone for the first time (particularly by email) can be stressful, and asking for favors (most often for someone’s time) is uncomfortable. These feelings can be compounded if you are a young attorney trying to connect with a networking target who is much more senior.

Here are five tips that I have found can take some of the anxiety out of networking and turn it into something more productive and enjoyable.

1. Have a Plan

The first step to productive networking is identifying what you are trying to accomplish. While not every interaction needs to be a calculated move towards a specific goal, it is important to be mindful about how your networking efforts can further your career goals. To network strategically, consider the following questions:

• Who are you reaching out to, and why are they the right target(s) for this effort?
• What ideas or impressions do you want them to take away from this interaction?
• What actions (if any) do you want them to take? You should have a well-articulated answer if they ask you “what can I do to help?”
• What is in it for them? More on that below.

The answers to these questions need not be overly complicated. Strengthening your relationships with people is always a positive thing to do, even if you are not sure how specifically that contact can help your career at the moment. If you cannot articulate answers to these questions at all, however, you may want to rethink your approach.

2. Be Succinct

No matter what your networking goals are, unless you can succinctly articulate your message and why it is important, your efforts are unlikely to be productive. People’s time is precious, and you do not want to force someone to untangle an overly complicated message. For each interaction, you should try to convey only one or two ideas, and you should never make more than one request at a time.

You may have much you want to say or ask your networking target, but focus on one idea first and save the rest for follow-up interactions. Successful networking takes time (enacting change even more so), and meaningful relationships are not built overnight. Spreading your big idea or request across multiple interactions will also help you develop stronger relationships by manufacturing additional touch-points with your contacts.

3. Identify Ways You Can Help Your Target

Maya Angelou once said, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Networking is about relationship building, and if you can make someone associate you with feelings of gratitude or indebtedness, you are in business. Remember, this interaction is a networking opportunity for your target as well. If you can demonstrate how your idea or request benefits them, they are more likely to aid your efforts.

A successful networker will keep her eye out for ways she can add value for those with whom she seeks to develop stronger relationships. An easy way to get in someone’s good graces is to help them with their own networking efforts by doing things like supporting an organization with which they are affiliated or offering to help them write an article.

4. Meet Face-To-Face Whenever Possible

When it comes to networking, there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. In-person meetings are more memorable and effective, because people convey a significant amount of information through non-verbal cues, like facial expressions, tone and body language. Moreover, face-to-face meetings may be less stressful because you will receive an instantaneous response, which can give a sense of how well your message is being received.

Meeting somewhere outside of the office is even better, because it reduces distractions and the chance for interruptions. Consider inviting your target to grab lunch or a cup of coffee. If you set something up make sure to send a calendar invite, but do not get discouraged if your meeting
gets rescheduled. In my experience, it is not uncommon to have to reschedule—sometimes several times. Do not take it personally. Moreover, sticking with an appointment that may need to be rescheduled shows perseverance, and demonstrates that you are passionate about your ideas and value your target’s input.

Of course, meeting face-to-face is not always practicable or preferable. You may be looking to network with someone across the country or who is only available at odd or unpredictable hours. If you are networking with a large group, it might be easier to set up a conference call than to figure out a time everyone can meet in person. Never let perfection be the enemy of good, and take cues from your targets when it comes to their communication preferences.

5. Tips For Communicating Via Email

As important as facetime is, the fact is that if you are going to be an aggressive networker, you are going to be sending a lot of emails. Here are a few tips to make sure those communications are as effective as possible:

• Make sure it is succinct. If possible, keep your emails to under 100 words. Paragraphs should be no longer than three sentences.

• Make sure it is organized. Strongly consider incorporating headings, fonts, and bullet lists. Any email longer than three substantive paragraphs should have a summary at the beginning.

• If sending to multiple people, be mindful of your audience. How will the different recipients’ presence (or lack thereof if you BCC people) impact how your message is received?

• Follow up with a thank you. Remember, people’s time is precious, and networking is all about manufacturing touchpoints. Saying thank you will also help your networking target feel more positively about your interaction.

• Send your email between 8 and 9 am, ideally at the beginning of the week. Someone once told me you were most likely to get a response if you send an email in that window. I have no idea whether that’s backed by any empirical data, but, anecdotally, I can tell you it is 100% true. If you take one thing away from this article, this should be it. (I saved it for the end to reward those of you who made it this far—thanks!)

So I realize that was more than five tips, but “26 Tips for Taking the Anxiety Out of Networking” just didn’t have the same ring to it. While no amount of tips will make asking your friends to donate to the nonprofit of your choice any less awkward or silence the butterflies in your stomach when you go to knock on that corner partner’s door, I hope you find these tips useful and they help empower you to begin taking charge of your career.