



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by Stephen Seckler

Dating and networking etiquette

As the economy sinks, competition for good legal jobs, both in-house and at law firms, is on the rise.

Consequently, anyone in search of a new job needs to be extra proactive. Excessive reliance on classified ads and recruiters is a particularly poor job search strategy in this environment.

Instead, a sustained networking effort is much more likely to produce results.

In this column, I do not plan to revisit the basics of networking. For that, you may want to follow the links under “career resources” on my website.

But since the weather is nice and networking is in the air, I thought the subject was worthy of revisiting.

In some ways, networking is a lot like a first date. When done right, a networking meeting is more like a social encounter than a business meeting.

A while ago, I found a list of do’s and don’ts for first dates in the Calendar section of The Boston Globe (see March 16, 2000). With some added commentary, I think that these tips are relevant to cultivating professional relationships.

[Eight Do’s Of First Dates ...](#)

1. Do listen carefully to one another

Commentary (i.e., how this dating tip relates to professional networking): Good listening skills are critical for relationship building. If you want to build a strong network, spend most of the time trying to find out what is of interest or concern to the other professional.

The more you know about the other individual, the easier it is to find ways that you can be of help to them. In turn, they will be more likely to remember you and more likely to think of you when something relevant crosses their desk.

2. Do settle on who will pay before going out

Commentary: In professional dating, the rule is a little different. When you ask somebody to give you their time, you should always offer to pay, and there is no need to mention this at the time you make plans to get together.

Caveat: if the other party insists on paying when the check comes, do not make it uncomfortable for them. Let them pay.

3. Do admit that you are nervous or shy, instead of talking too much or not at all

Commentary: In professional situations, you should strive to be yourself. People appreciate it when you are willing to show some weakness rather than struggle to be someone you are not. But don't act like you expect the other person to solve all of your problems. They are a potential resource, not your therapist.

4. Do suggest options for how to spend the date

Commentary: Have a game plan in mind when you contact the individual. You will sound more prepared and focused if you have a particular suggestion.

On the other hand, be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the individual you are trying to meet. Maybe they do not have time for lunch or prefer to have you come to their office.

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5. Do anticipate surprises – be they good or bad

Commentary: While this meeting may be very important to you, the other individual may remember little or nothing about the reason you are getting together. Don't be surprised if you need to take some time to reeducate them.

6. Do note the little, usual things that you might have in common

Commentary: Finding common interests is a good way to build rapport. It may also provide you with some ideas on how you can help the other individual.

7. Do make sure you have your own means to get home, if necessary

Commentary: When you contact someone for networking purposes, don't take a lot of the person's time getting directions to their office. You can always check their website or call back and ask the receptionist. Of course, if they want to give you directions, it is okay to keep them on the phone.

8. Do give him or her another chance and a second date (unless the first date was an utter failure)

Commentary: If you did not click with a date, you would probably not follow up with him or her. When you are building professional relationships, you should always follow up with a thank-you note, even if you did not care for the person.

Even better is to think of something you can send the individual at some future point (e.g., an article that you think might interest them). Keeping up contacts over time is critical to networking success.

When you are dating, you are looking for a special someone. Networking is different. While it is always nice to connect with the "right" people (i.e., individuals who seem well-connected), it is more important to have a good connection with the people in your network.

Do not expect to click with everyone you try to meet. Networking is a volume business and making a large number of contacts is much more important than meeting with any one individual.

... And Eight Don'ts

1. Don't talk about the ex unless he or she does

Commentary: The conventional wisdom in a job interview is that you should never say anything negative about a past or present employer. The rationale is that if you do, the prospective employer will presume that you are equally likely to badmouth them once you come to work.

A networking situation is a little different. Since the nature of the meeting is to get career advice, you may be more apt to tell the individual what is not working for you at your current job. But try to do it diplomatically without focusing too much blame on your employer.

2. Don't make a long, intensive first date – there is always time for a second date

Commentary: It is okay to have a long networking lunch, coffee or drop-in meeting. The important thing is to give the other individual ample opportunity to wrap things up in a reasonable amount of time. In other words, ask questions that show a sensitivity to their time constraints.

If things are going well, however, and the other individual seems happy to continue schmoozing, then by all means, keep it going unless you need to get somewhere yourself.

3. Don't shred your napkin or display other annoying table habits

Commentary: Annoying habits or body language can leave a bad impression.

4. Don't drink too much – you may regret the loss of inhibitions

Commentary: Don't drink alcohol at a business meeting.

5. Don't be obsessed about whether your date is having a good time (asking once or twice is enough)

Commentary: While it is nice to be deferential to a professional contact who is making time to meet with you, don't go overboard in thanking them. A good professional thank you will do.

6. Don't be rude to wait staff or others attending to you

Commentary: Be respectful of support staff. If time permits, you may even want to strike up a conversation with the receptionist or secretary to learn more about the organization or the individual with whom you are meeting.

7. Don't linger on the goodbye

Commentary: Know when it is time to leave or say goodbye; you don't want to be the guest who wouldn't leave.

8. Don't change your medication on the same day

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Conclusion

There are no hard and fast rules about networking. Your success will depend in part on your own persistence, although there is also an element of luck involved.

But if you follow some of these rules of etiquette, you'll find what you are looking for quicker and you will build a stronger network that you can tap into the next time you are in search mode.

The best networkers realize that you are never done networking and that the best time to network is when you do not need anything but just want to build relationships. So what are you waiting for?