



NETWORKING LISA BUTLER

Networking's net gains

Unsure about networking? Don't be – successful networking makes developing your business easier and will generate far more business than any other selling strategy, writes Lisa Butler.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a dramatic change in the competitive landscape for legal firms in Australia and internationally. Previously, many firms could rely on their reputation and brand to bring in new business. Some fortunate lawyers inherited practices from their forefathers and therefore did not see a need to actively develop their business.

Now, with significant competition for clients between firms, the most successful lawyers have changed their mind-set to focus on gaining and retaining clients. These same lawyers have come to terms with the fact that technical competence, or even brilliance, alone will not generate business.

Fortunately, you have several options for how you develop your business: you can develop your selling skills and pick up the phone and make cold calls, pound the pavement looking for new business and spend large sums on advertising and marketing. Alternatively, or in addition to these activities, you can network. Personal relationships and networking will generate far more business than any other selling strategy.

Networking is often misunderstood and many myths have developed about the true nature of networking, which deter many lawyers from networking or prevent them from networking successfully. The fact is networking makes business development easier. If you network well, you don't need to cold call or advertise, as your network of contacts will do that for you (and for a fraction of the price!). This is a far less stressful way of doing business.

You may be thinking that networking is just as stressful as selling, but networking can significantly reduce your stress levels and make you more confident and comfortable when networking.

Busting the myths

Here are some of the most common myths that make people hesitant to network. Bust these myths and you will feel more confident when networking and be able to develop the skills to be more successful.

Myth #1: Networking is selling

Successful networkers know that the true nature of networking is developing and maintaining genuinely helpful relationships with others. They also know that the focus should be on finding ways to help others. People who focus on selling themselves or their services are taking a short term approach and don't understand the true nature of networking. They will receive negative reactions from those with whom they network.

Myth #2: You don't need to build relationships, because you are an expert

Technical ability is the ticket to the game, but it doesn't mean you'll win. Be careful not to make assumptions about why people will buy your services. Don't assume that your technical ability speaks for itself and should be enough to get you business. Relationships are key to business success, and networking can help the work come in the door more easily.

Myth #3: It's pointless to follow up unless there is actual business to discuss

If you network well, you would have created an opportunity to follow up that's more focused on helping the other person rather than you. This makes it much easier, and less stressful, to follow up appropriately. It's also important to recognise that you don't always have to have a reason to catch up with people. People accept networking at face value, as long as they can see that you are genuinely interested in helping them.

Myth #4: Networking ability is innate, not learned

Networking ability is not necessarily innate. Some of the best networkers are highly introverted. Networking doesn't come naturally for everyone, yet is a skill that can be learned and improved with practice.

Myth #5: Networking is a waste of time – you never get results

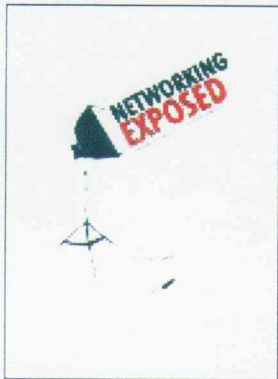
Accept that networking is a long-term proposition. Attending networking events is only one avenue to build relationships – it's what you do afterwards that makes up most of your networking effort. Take a strategic approach to networking and you'll find that you are more likely to attend the right things, network with the right people and maintain contact with those people with ease.

Building skills

Successful networkers effortlessly and confidently meet people, manage conversations, find ways to help people and follow up and maintain contact in an appropriate manner. They seem to possess four core characteristics. They:

1. have a networking strategy, and keep effective records to track, monitor and maintain regular contact with the people in their network
2. focus on helping others, rather than themselves
3. are genuinely interested in other people and generate positive and memorable impressions
4. interact well with a wide range of people and develop warm and valuable relationships in a short space of time.

The good news is that these skills and characteristics can be learned through observation, awareness of techniques and tools, practice and patience. They will also significantly reduce the time you need to spend networking and selling your business, and the stress involved. Here are a few tips to get you started:



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a) Take a strategic approach. Many people network haphazardly, attending random events with the wrong people. This is a waste of your time and adds to your burden. Consider why you're networking and what you hope to achieve. Build networking strategies into your business plan, so that you can be certain you're networking in the right way, in the right places and with the right people.

You should be spreading your networking effort across a range of activities with different people. Many people tend to focus their networking efforts on their existing clients – while they're important, it's critical that you also network with prospective clients, referral sources, advisers and others.

There is so much more to networking than just attending events. This is an avenue to meet people or maintain relationships. However, networking is so much more than that. Most of your time in networking should be spent keeping in contact, connecting people and finding opportunities to help the people in your network.

b) Prepare well. Fortunately, much of your preparation can be delegated (reducing your burden). Preparation can reduce any hesitation to network, as you will feel more confident and in control. Prepare by conducting some research before you go (on the event, the speaker, the people who will be

there, current events, industry-related information). You can then consider who you want to meet or catch up with, and have some conversation topics and questions to ask. Be prepared physically – if you don't look or feel ready to go, chances are you won't look like you really want to be there.

c) Get your mind-set right. If you think positively in any situation, you increase your chances of success. As Martin Seligman points out in his book, *Learned Optimism*, people can learn to think optimistically and reap the benefits. His research showed that you can control your thinking to enhance optimism and reduce pessimism.

Seligman has found that people who are positive, optimistic and have a sense of humour, have healthier, longer and more successful personal lives and careers. Interestingly, they have fewer heart attacks, a boosted immune system, reduced pain and stress, they live eight to 10 years longer than their pessimistic colleagues and they perceive themselves to be happy.

When networking, be aware of the thoughts that just pop into your head telling you that you "shouldn't go to this networking event because you are tired/overworked/don't feel like it", or that "it will just be a waste of time" or "I'm not good at these things".

These inner voices often determine the outcome before you even head off

to the event. If these voices take over, chances are you will unconsciously display your true thoughts and feelings through your energy and your demeanour.

In summary

- Successful networking makes business development easier and gives you a distinct competitive advantage.
- Many people are hesitant to network, or network inappropriately, due to common myths about the nature of networking.
- Networking is about building and maintaining genuinely helpful relationships with others.
- You should not be selling when you're networking.
- Networking is a life skill as well as a business skill, and can be learned.
- Approach networking in a strategic manner – you need to consider where you network and who with, and manage your network and keep in contact.
- Focus on finding ways to help others.
- There are a range of tips and techniques to make it easier. Eventually, your networking nerves will be laid to rest. ●

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