



Get out There and Meet People!

Building a Professional Network as a Young Lawyer

By Jonathan B. Skowron

We all want to be *the* lawyer that comes to mind when a client is faced with a problem or opportunity; but even if you're the best advocate for the job, if the person hiring counsel doesn't know who you are, it won't matter. One of the most important steps to building a successful practice, therefore, is becoming *known*—*i.e.*, networking. Maybe you are one of those people who networks naturally, who thrives on meeting new people, and who effortlessly floats between various social circles. Or, perhaps, the mere mention of the word “networking” makes you queasy. Either way, one of the first things on every new attorney's mind should be the task of building relationships, which, one day, may lead to billable work. Starting to build such a network can seem daunting as a young attorney, but taking some simple steps early on will pay huge dividends in the years to come.

First, identify your already-existing networks. The easiest way to network is to do so with people you already know and (hopefully) like. Friends and family are the most obvious examples. Heading to a barbecue with friends from college? Getting together with loved ones for the holidays? Ask what they're up to, what line of work they're in, and how their jobs are going. Are you religious? Meet as many people as you can at your place of worship, and find out what they do. Are you a member of a gym? Do you play pick-up basketball on the weekends? Simply be aware of the people you already know, and ask them questions. You never know where these relationships might lead.

Second, identify networks that you'd like to join. Spend some time researching organizations that you'd like to be a part of. *Professional* organizations are important because they help you to get to know your fellow attorneys. Join your local bar association, and perhaps a relevant subcommittee. Participate in DRI. See if your city has a local Inn of Court. These are great ways to get to know other lawyers and to share knowledge—and referrals. *Business* organizations are also wonderful

because they offer opportunities to network directly with potential clients. Join a local chamber of commerce or a specific industry organization if it relates to your practice. Finally, identify several *community* organizations that you'd like to be a part of. As attorneys, we have a duty to give back to the community, and helping out a local nonprofit, especially at a board level, is a great way to meet other community leaders. Because it can sometimes be difficult to get onto a board as a young attorney, be on the lookout for smaller organizations, which might need more help, or some larger organizations that have “advisory” boards specifically designed for young professionals.

Third, think about what you'd like to write, or topics that you'd like to speak on. Publishing and speaking engagements are also important parts of networking, and they often go hand in hand with expanding your networks. Once you are in an organization, you can write for its publications or speak at its events. Publishing and speaking opportunities are powerful ways to make your name visible, and even small items, such as client e-mail alerts and the like, can really set you apart.

Fourth, come up with a written plan. Once you have identified your current networks and networks you want to join, put them down *on paper*. This part is key; it will help keep you focused and honest about your progress. For your already-existing networks, make a list of your contacts. For networks that you'd like to join, list people you know in those networks, or people you know who might know someone in those networks—or just reach out to the organizations directly. Most groups are excited to get new members, especially young ones. As far as publications and speaking engagements go, make a plan to publish X number of articles or client updates each year, or engage in at least X number of non-court-related speaking engagements.

Fifth, keep track of your contacts. Once you have a written list of networks and goals, set up a *written* (again) chart to keep track of your contacts. An excel spreadsheet works great for this. Create a separate page in the spreadsheet for each network, with a row for each related contact. You can put each contact's personal, professional, and contact information all in one place.



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Most importantly, keep a running list in the spreadsheet to record every time that you've reached out to someone so that you'll know whom you've spoken to recently and whom you need to follow up with. If you notice that you've not spoken to someone in a while, ask him or her to have lunch or grab a drink or coffee, or even just give him or her a call, or shoot the person an e-mail. Consistency is crucial.

Lastly, here are some final tips. Revisit your written plan and spreadsheet regularly and keep them updated. Put this on your "to-do" list every week or month, or at least every other month to keep track of your progress. If you can, get someone to help keep you accountable—ideally, a mentor with a few more years' experience (which could be the subject of an entirely separate column). If you don't have a mentor, even a fellow young attorney will do, as long as you have someone to encourage you and keep you honest about your efforts.

Developing a professional network is a life-long process, but the first steps are often the hardest. If you start by simply identifying and writing down your goals and contacts, and if you're consistent with your efforts and keep regular track of your progress, you will be well on your way to building a successful practice. 