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Networking law for lawyers

IF YOU WANT to be a great networker, you need to practice the five-foot rule—it helps open the door

NEXT MONTH, graduating law students across the country can expect to hear “career rules to live by” from commencement speakers. “Fight for justice” and “Uphold standards of professionalism” were popular when I graduated. And I would never disagree with those.

Well, here’s a “career rule to live by” for those newly minted lawyers who want to develop a lot of business and make a lot of money. It’s called the “five-foot rule.” It says, “Say hello to anyone standing within five feet of you.”

One rainmaker I know is a big believer in the five-foot rule. He told me that one of the best places to practice the rule is on an airplane. “When I sit down on a plane, I always ask the person beside me, ‘Are you heading out or coming home?’” And the conversation goes from there.

The five-foot rule is important because you never know; that person beside you might be someone who can hire you. Of course, saying “hello” by itself doesn’t make you a great networker. You have to know how to transform “five-foot rule” encounters into the beginnings of a business relationship.

It’s a three-step process.

- Find a point of common interest.
- Find out what the other person does for a living and ask questions.
- If appropriate, ask for a business card and permission to follow up.

To find a point of common interest, do what my mother calls “The Barbara Walters Routine.” Like Walters, show interest in the other person by asking questions and listening. You can ask, “Where are you from?” “Are you planning any trips?” “Do you have any hobbies?” If you find you both love Italian food, the relationship has started.

I know one attorney who struck up a conversation with an associate general counsel at a networking event only to learn that they both hailed from Philadelphia. The Philly

connection led to a lunch, which led to golf, which led to an opportunity to pitch for a piece of business—which was successful.

Next, you have to ask what a person does for a living. Lawyers have told me that they don’t like asking “What do you do?”

“It seems too mercenary,” one lawyer said. Such a statement reflects the anti-sales attitudes that are too deeply inbred in many law firm cultures.

Get over it. People like talking about their work. And lawyers are in a unique position to help businesses succeed. But you can’t help them succeed if you don’t know their business. “How did you get into that business?” is a great networking question.

I know a real estate lawyer who spent 15 minutes chatting with a well-dressed gentleman at an event. Amazingly, this lawyer never found out that he was talking with an important real estate developer. What a waste.

Novice business developers often think they’ve done a good job working a room if they give out all of their cards. But great business developers don’t track how many cards they give out. They track the number collected.

Great business developers place the cards into a database, research the prospect’s company and follow up. These rainmakers understand that starting a conversation at a networking event, by itself, won’t get you business. You have to learn more about the prospect’s business, follow up, and get a sense from the prospect of how you can be a resource.

And when you ask for someone’s card, it’s a great idea to add, “Would it be OK if I called you to set up a meeting?”

So maybe this isn’t the kind of advice that’s popular with law school commencement speakers. But next time you’re on an airplane, try leaning over to the person next to you and saying, “Are you headed out or coming home?” It might be the beginning of a profitable friendship. ☞