

You Don't Have to Network with Just Lawyers

By Diane Costigan, Managing Director, Shannon & Manch LLP

Networking is one of the most important tools any attorney has in his/her career toolbox. It can help you find a job; develop business; uncover hidden opportunities; discover previously unknown resources; and even develop longstanding friendships. Naturally, it will be most likely that you will network with other lawyers. One of the biggest mistakes I've seen clients make with respect to networking is to only seek out lawyers as contacts. Focusing your networking efforts exclusively with lawyers can limit your career development. Here's why.

- **Universal rule:** It is a universal rule that everyone is a lawyer, is married or related to a lawyer or has a close personal friend who's a lawyer. So, no matter who you are talking to, you are never more than a few degrees away from a lawyer contact. For example, you may be looking for a job. The person who's always on the treadmill next to you at the gym who works in fashion and with whom you're now friends happens to be the daughter of the hiring partner at a mid-sized firm. Bingo!
- **It's not just about you:** An important part of networking is building up your own contacts to be in a position to help connect others. Helping others will inevitably be returned back to you through networking karma. It's real, believe me. The person you help may not be the exact person who ends up helping you down the line but the help will come back to you in one form or another. It will be important then, to be a "connector" and to be generous with your network. You will be a more effective connector if you have a diverse range of people in your network. For example, you are trying to develop business from a contact going through the "how to get a toddler into a Manhattan pre-school" ordeal. You may not know another lawyer who's been through that experience but your next door neighbor, who happens to be in advertising, just did. Being able to connect your potential business development lead with a helpful resource will make you look good in his/her eyes and fresh on his/her radar screen.
- **Sometimes it is about you:** Even with respect to your own career goals, it may be helpful to know people in other industries. For example, you want to be an entertainment lawyer but have no experience in that industry. Clearly it will be important to network with entertainment lawyers. Don't stop there though. To really enhance your chances of breaking through potential transition barriers, think beyond entertainment lawyers to other professionals it might be helpful to know. What non-lawyers may work with or know entertainment lawyers or have information on that field? Public relations professionals could be one option. Media people another. Maybe even actors who use entertainment lawyers (dream big!).
- **In house lawyers aren't the only people who influence hiring decisions:** For those at large firms trying to develop business, it's important to know that in-house lawyers aren't always the ones who

make decisions about who gets hired. Sometimes business people make those decisions or, at least they can have a major impact. If you have a friend who's an investment banker he may be in a good position to refer you to their legal department. Or, he can be instrumental in getting you an introduction/appointment with the right person in the legal department. For solo practitioners and those at smaller firms, depending on the clients you are trying to attract, you will want to focus your networking efforts directly on your target market. If you are a T & E lawyer, you may want to network with financial advisors who can refer you or join your college's club to go directly to your source.

- **The law may not be your ultimate destination**: You may not know it now (or maybe you do) but you may want to leave the legal profession at some point. To transition out of the law it will be critical to know people outside the industry. Let's say you want to work off your student loans for a few years in a large law firm but your ultimate career goal is to do international relief work. Your college roommate is currently working with displaced refugees in Nepal. Not only will it be important to keep up with her, you will want introductions to the other people in her network. You will also want to get involved in either pro bono or traditional volunteer work around such issues to expose you to as many people in the field as possible. Waiting until your three years at your firm are over to start the process of networking with such contacts will only delay your search, especially in a bad economy when there may be a flood of applicants.

All good networking should flow from a strategic career vision. Being creative with how you're networking and with who can have a significant impact. Set your goal and then think backwards. If you want to be a certain type of lawyer in a specific position, dig down a few layers and think through who else you would be interacting with. Who else would know your target audience? Apply those answers to your networking strategy.

As you get more senior in your career, you will want to focus your efforts as much as possible. In the early stages of your career, however, your goal may well be to find out what your strategic career vision is. You have a lot of options ahead of you, so you can afford to cast a wider net to start to get some answers. Be smart and include non-lawyers in that net. Remember, you never know who the people you know know and when that will come in handy vis-à-vis your strategic career vision.



Diane Costigan is a Managing Director at Shannon & Manch who provides coaching, consulting and training to law firms and lawyers regarding career strategy and performance. She can be reached Costigan@shannonandmanch.com.

Article Appeared in the New York City Bar Lawyers Connect Newsletter: Summer 2010 issue