

Strategies for Better Networking

The where, when and how of networking through organizations

By Carol Schiro Greenwald, Ph.D.

Ask people where to find the best networking opportunities, and you get a range of answers. Some people say that one-on-one meetings are the best way to network because only when communicating directly can you have the kind of personal discussions that create trusted relationships. Other people prefer to network online to amass a large number of contacts since "you never know where you will meet useful or important connections."

A third contingent participates in organizations as a way of focusing their networking efforts while at the same time expanding their opportunities to meet people. I focus here on networking through membership in different organizations. What are the different types of organizations you can join? What are the different opportunities each offers? What can you do to get the most out of your networking efforts? I offer answers to these questions below.

NETWORKING DEFINED

Most networkers define "networking" as participating in activities that create trusted personal relationships through the give-and-take of ideas, activities and mutual assistance. A managing partner in a midsize New York law firm adds that, "Rainmakers like to help people. Business comes from these relationships because people see your integrity through your interactions with them." Jonathan Rosen, founder of the Collaberex networking group, says, "People do business with those *who provide the most value* who they also know, like and trust."

The purpose of networking is to develop a group of people who can help you attain your goals. If you are a law firm lawyer, one obvious goal is to develop a robust network of referral sources and prospective clients.

AVAILABLE GROUPS

The organization universe is large and constantly expanding. The website for the National Trade and Professional Associations Directory says it has information on "8,000+ [in-person] associations, professional societies and labor unions and their 35,000+ executives." From the perspective of business development, this vast universe can be sorted into the following eight categories:

1. General membership groups such as BNI, LeTip and Gotham City

Networking typically have a mixed membership of professionals and business members, usually with only one person per business category per chapter, drawn from a specific geographic area. Some groups segment further by including only business-to-business or business-to-consumer companies. Others do not make that distinction.

2. Professional associations such as the American Bar Association and the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants enroll members of their profession and sometimes include vendors that provide services for the profession.
3. Industry or trade associations such as Associated Builders and Contractors and the American Bankers Association include members representing the various subgroups within the category as well as members who service these industries.
4. Geographically localized groups for people working in different segments of the same industry offer camaraderie, referral opportunities and knowledge from information contributed by colleagues with different perspectives. Examples include the International Network of Boutique and Independent Law Firms, whose members are decision makers in small boutique law firms, and The Networking Group, whose members include financial executives.
5. "Peer advisor" groups such as Vistage, Network!Network! and Collaberex are composed of members who share similar issues and look for similar opportunities. In the meetings, the whole group participates in discussions offering solutions to an individual member's issues and problems.
6. Private groups are typically created by one person as a "personal board of directors." Members usually know each other intimately and meet at least monthly to share information and business leads.
7. Honorary groups that you join by invitation such as the College of Commercial Arbitrators and Litigation Counsel of America offer access to well-known people in an individual's profession.
8. Social, philanthropic, cultural, religious and civic groups provide opportunities for people to expand their network while pursuing worthwhile goals for their community.

THE BEST GROUPS FOR YOU

Selecting the right organizations for you depends on your goals. Where

are you in your career? What are your goals for 2018? How will your network be able to help you reach your goals? Usually lawyers begin organization networking in either locally based general membership groups or professional associations.

Local, general membership groups. Young lawyers looking to develop a network join Chambers of Commerce, structured groups like BNI and LeTip, and city-specific general purpose groups where they can meet potential clients and people in other industries who become resources for them.

General membership groups feel safe for newcomers because they are usually friendly, collegial and nonthreatening. Meeting agendas are casual, and the obligation to meet with members one-on-one between meetings is rarely enforced.

Often the groups are built around a "real estate" core group. Such a group consists of commercial and residential real estate brokers, a local banker, a real estate lawyer, an accountant, a mortgage broker, a title agency and marketing agency people. These people interact constantly, creating a friendly, interwoven core for the group.

Structured groups like BNI have strict requirements for participation, rigid meeting agendas and an emphasis on referrals among group members. They usually meet weekly, which leads to strong friendships among members.

Professional associations. These are also safe places to begin networking through organizations. Newcomers can join committees related to their practice areas or personal interests and attend social events keyed to their age and experience where they meet others like themselves.

Professional associations are a perfect example of organizations lawyers join for different reasons at various points in their career. Young attorneys join to meet others in their demographic and begin to form relationships that will last throughout their careers. As midlevel lawyers move from one firm to another, they use association memberships to stay in contact with colleagues from previous firms. They often form strong referral relationships to take advantage of instances when one attorney or the other is conflicted out of a matter, or the matter is too small for them. Senior attorneys active in bar associations often develop a reputation as a "lawyer's lawyer." These attorneys use bar leadership positions to form strong relationships and a solid referral network.

Solo attorneys join professional associations to keep up with changes in their practice areas and to seek other attorneys (1) more senior in their fields for mentorship (as the solo attorney develops a practice) or perhaps to join with the senior attorney(s) as of counsel or co-counsel on specific matters, and (2) in allied practice areas who become resources for knowledge and referrals. Attorneys who leave a firm to become solos often join or create local groups with lawyers in different practice areas to replicate the camaraderie, the practice area resources and the referral opportunities they appreciated as members of a firm.

Lawyers with an industry focus join industry associations. These groups present opportunities to (1) meet people in companies that could be potential clients; (2) learn the industry jargon so they can join in conversations as an equal; and (3) keep abreast of impactful trends, legislation and court decisions that provide an opening to use one's legal skills to help present and future clients.

Well-established, effective, successful networkers tend to gravitate to peer advice groups where they can build relationships with others like themselves. Members in these groups tend to represent the same decision-making level, usually C-suite or high-level managers, and move in the same world with the same target market. Sometimes these groups are national franchises like Vistage; at other times they are personal leadership groups of people who become informal boards of directors for each other. The groups share insights into business problems and leadership issues, confident that whatever is said in the room stays in the room.

IN-PERSON VERSUS ONLINE

There is no substitute for the in-person group as a channel to develop trust relationships with other people. Humans, like animals, need to size up others in the flesh to assess their authenticity.

Online groups can reinforce in-person relationships with opportunities to relate in meaningful ways by sharing connections and information.

SUMMARY THOUGHTS

Networking through organizations takes thought, time and money. Where you choose to expend your resources should reflect your goals. The best use of your time and money will be in organizations that offer openings to (1) create significant relationships with people who can help you develop as a professional, (2) grow your practice and (3) create a meaningful career.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF IN-PERSON NETWORKING ORGANIZATIONS

Typically, groups draw members from a local area. Some groups have members in business-to-business and business-to-consumer businesses while others focus on only one kind of company or level of decision maker. Usually the chapter has only one person per business category. To have a larger membership, groups sometimes slice and dice areas to maximize the occupations represented in the group. For example, there might be a small-company corporate lawyer, a mergers and acquisitions lawyer, a bankruptcy attorney and a white-collar crime attorney in the same networking group.

Most standard networking groups meet monthly, often for breakfast. In professional associations, committees tend to meet frequently while the membership as a whole only convenes once or twice a year. Organizations' fees run the gamut from free to thousands of dollars per year.

Standard programs include the following activities:

- A general networking period before the program begins.
- Introductions along the line of one-minute elevator speeches but with longer introductions from visitors considering membership in the group.
- Thank you notes for one-on-one meetings and referrals, and requests for desirable leads.
- A skills- or knowledge-focused program component, including:
 - A spotlight presentation by a member of the group.
 - A presentation by an outside expert.
- Group discussion of a single topic, sometimes as a whole group, but often in smaller groups or by tables.
- Reminders to meet with group members one-on-one in the interim between meetings.

BEST PRACTICES FOR GROUP PARTICIPATION

1. **Be active.** Membership without participation has little value. Schedule group meetings in your calendar and plan to attend regularly. Augment group meetings with one-on-one activities. Join committees and offer to help implement committee commitments. Seek leadership opportunities as a platform to meet people and increase your visibility within the group.
2. **Be prepared.** Research speakers and people you think may be helpful to you. Use meetings as opportunities to connect with key people. Contact those key people ahead of time to see if they will be at the meeting. If they will be there, plan to meet them. Similarly, make the time for one-on-one activities with people you want to become

trusted friends and colleagues.

3. **Be a giver.** Networking axiom No. 1 is, what goes around comes around. Use the magic phrase “How can I help you?” and mean it. When you promise something that will help someone else in the group, treat the offer as a commitment and follow through.
4. **Be patient.** Friendships are not built overnight. It takes time to create relationships, especially those that will help you expand your knowledge base, provide resources to help clients and colleagues, and establish strong referral alliances.

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