

C. The Importance of Networking

Contributed by David Tupper; Blake, Cassels & Graydon LLP

One of the skills that is often attributed to successful lawyers (or law students) is networking skills. Sometimes "networking" has a negative connotation to it, being equated with insincerity. Often, networking is thought of as onerous and unpalatable to most of us who lack movie-star confidence.

The reality, however, is that good networking is important, it need not be uncomfortable, and it is sincere.

Networking really refers to contact with people outside of law school, or the practice of law. That contact may come at social functions or "cocktail parties", or it may come from involvement in social or volunteer activity. In Calgary, there are numerous opportunities for networking as a lawyer, and as a law student.

As a law student, you will meet lawyers (and even potential future clients) through activities such as the orientation softball game, the orientation banquet and the Fall Recruitment Mixer. You will also meet lawyers through your involvement with Student Legal Assistance, or mootings. You may also, during the interview process, be invited to cocktail parties or dinners with lawyers.

These activities are fun, and often rewarding. They will provide you with an opportunity to learn about law in an informal setting and to converse with lawyers on a wide variety of topics.

When you are involved in these events, there are certain things that you can do to make your networking more effective. This list is by no means exhaustive:

1. Do your best to make a good impression. Whatever the nature of the contact, it is reasonably likely that impressions of you are being conveyed to others by the lawyer that you meet. While a lawyer may be friendly, your involvement with them is not "off the record".
2. Be yourself. Every law student has already achieved great things. These achievements have not been realized by pretending to be someone else. Ultimately you want to be hired as an articling student or summer student by a firm based on who you are, not a façade.
3. As indicated above, the opportunity for networking extends far beyond cocktail parties. Find an activity that you like. You will be at your best in such activities.
4. When networking, practice good conversational skills. Make eye contact and read the person opposite, so that you can gauge when it is appropriate to break off the contact, the reaction to the conversation, and where the conversation is going.

Continued ...

C. The Importance of Networking

Try to find a conversation topic that is of interest to both of you. It is also useful to ask questions of the other person so that they also participate in the conversation. The more that they are talking, the less that you have to.

5. It is helpful to have a set of questions or topics that are common to many people which can be used as fodder for a conversation. Vacation or Christmas plans, books, movies, a lawyer's history with their firm, their personal history in the city and former schooling are all useful topics and often lead to other topics.
6. In a similar vein, it is helpful to be reasonably current with world or sport happenings as this also generates conversation.
7. When you are in the most uncomfortable of networking situations, the cocktail party, read the room. Look for conversations that you can join, or start. If you are in line for drinks or food, speak with the people next to you. Often these conversations will continue after you each obtain your food or drinks. Look, as well, for groups in which the stance of those participating in the conversation is open. This indicates that they are amenable to others joining the conversation. When you join such conversations, listen to the conversation so that you can contribute. Introduce yourself. If you are engaged in a conversation and someone joins you, make a point of introducing yourself and the individual with whom you were speaking so that the new comer can also be part of the conversation. Make sure that you are looking at the person with whom you are speaking and not over their shoulder for someone better. It is entirely appropriate to gently break off a conversation after a few minutes. Think in advance of ways that you can gracefully do so, such as by indicating that you are going to get more food or drinks, or that you have monopolized enough of their time and should let them speak with others.
8. After networking opportunities, follow-up may be appropriate. Follow-up is helpful because it reinforces the positive impression that you have made. Not every situation, however, creates an opportunity for follow-up and judgment should be used.

In contrast to the above suggestions of helpful steps in networking, there are other things that create the opposite negative result. Insincerity, inappropriate familiarity, a manifested desire to be somewhere else or expressing negativity about your school, your peers, the law, or other things generally are not appealing.

Also, do not attempt to monopolize the time of the person with whom you are talking, or upstage your peers, or generally do other things that you would not do in another social setting. Finally, avoid drinking too much. If you have had a lot to drink, do not network.

In summary, make efforts to meet people in the legal community. Enjoy those encounters and be yourself. The results will be positive.