

Young Lawyers

BY GUEST COLUMNIST TARA H. POPOVA, ESQ.



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF NETWORKING

Building a career is like building a house: you start from scratch, build a strong foundation and you end up putting in a lot of hard work before seeing any results. There are different materials that go into a house; one cannot build a house with just bricks, just cement or just stucco. The same goes for building a career. When building a career, we have to start from scratch by going to law school first. Then we need to build a strong foundation for success by getting good grades, followed by interviewing and getting a “good job,” and then actually doing well at that good job.

As in building a house, much more than what is seen on the outside goes into the process of constructing a career. Just like with a house, you cannot build a career using just a couple of materials, e.g. hard work and good grades. There is one key ingredient to career-building that many attorneys and law students underestimate: networking. Networking is important because it helps us connect with and get to know the people around us; this in turn ends up opening doors we often did not know existed (e.g. career opportunities, business opportunities, new clients, etc.).

After years of practicing my networking skills, with the help of my mentor and friend, Brett Axelrod, whom I consider to be the epitome of a professional networker, we compiled a networking “cheat sheet,” outlining the ten commandments of networking.

1. Thou Shalt Attend

RSVP and actually go. Finding out about a great event and promising your friends you’ll go is not the same as actually attending the event. Bailing can be tempting when you are tired and just want to go home, but guess what? We are lawyers, and we are tired most of the time. Stop finding excuses for not attending, and just get yourself to the event.

2. Thou Shalt Prepare

Being prepared was important in law school, it is important in law practice and it is important in networking. Your preparation prior to the event should at least include the following: think about where you are going, what type of event it is, who is going to be there and who you want to meet. Do not forget to bring business cards, think ahead about how to get there, where to park and what to wear.

3. Thou Shalt Try These Strategies:

Read name tags (most people prefer being referred to by name, rather than as “hey you”), go with a buddy, approach and be approachable (smile: no one wants to approach a grump), listen (most

people like to hear themselves talk and like good listeners), circulate gracefully (do not stand in one spot throughout the entire event) and follow up (remember at least one thing from each conversation and follow up by sending a quick email showing you remember what was discussed during the conversation).

4. Thou Shalt Say Something

It is important to be a good listener, but you also need to be able to find something to contribute to the conversation. Try to make casual small talk, preferably not related to work or business. Approaching someone with a, “so, what type of business are you in? Aha! Do you need a lawyer?” is not the most subtle or successful of approaches. Remember you are building a house – you should be familiar with the concept of delayed gratification by now. Start by asking the person to tell you more about themselves, listen with interest to their responses, smile and make eye contact. Building relationships with people is a process that may take years, but you never know when that person you met at a networking event a couple of years ago will call to say they need your help on a case.

5. Thou Shalt Mind Thy Manners

Learn etiquette and mind your manners. Try to acknowledge others and treat everyone (from the valet to the managing partner of your dream firm) nicely.

6. Thou Shalt Avoid the Common Crutches

These all fall under “common sense” but are definitely worth mentioning: do not go to an event starved and gorge at the buffet; do not get drunk! Inebriation makes it more than a little challenging to make a good impression; do not play on your cell phone or tablet (you are there to connect with people, not to bury your face in Facebook); do not arrive too late or leave too early; do not misuse the buddy system – it is good to have a friend with you, but that should not stop you from talking to other people; and remember that you do not have three hands. It is impossible to hold a drink, and a plate of food, and shake people’s hands all while carrying on a conversation: choose wisely.

7. Thou Shalt Remember the Three Es

Make an Effort, bring your Energy and exude Enthusiasm.

8. Thou Shalt Dress Appropriately

Avoid dressing too provocatively or outrageously (save the sexy party clothes for the club), make sure your grooming is professional (green hair may or may not look adorable on your favorite reality star, but it is not the most appropriate look for a professional networking event). Generally, do not wear anything to a networking event that you would not wear to a job interview.

9. Thou Shalt Remember the Three Cs

Courtesy. Charm. Chutzpah.

10. Thou Shalt Edit Your Sense of Humor

A networking event is not the right place to make political or religious jokes, because that type of joke may offend someone. Make sure your sense of humor is appropriate, timely and tasteful.

Follow these ten commandments of networking, combined with hard work and dedication, and watch the house called your career begin to rise before your eyes. And don’t forget that building relationships with people is a process, so you need to keep attending events and make an effort to stay in touch with the people you meet. Then, once your house is built and ready, you can invite all those new friends you made from your prior networking! **NL**

An associate at the national law firm of Fox Rothschild, **TARA POPOVA** is skilled in a broad range of legal matters, with particular experience in commercial litigation and adversary proceedings in bankruptcy. She received her J.D. from William S. Boyd School of Law in 2010, and her B.S. in International Business and Management with a minor in Marketing from Amsterdam School of Business (HES Hogeschool voor Economische Studies) in 2006.

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