How to start networking

Many of Legal Authority's clients ask the very same question when they first hear about networking. "Why," they wonder, "in a legal community driven by the bottom line and billable hours, would people ever take time away from work to meet with me, someone they have never met before?"

There are a several reasons why other lawyers will help you find your new direction. One is altruism. Maybe it's the spirit of "help thy neighbor" going all the way back to the barn raisings of frontier days. Maybe it's because most of us, if approached in the right way, enjoy talking about ourselves and offering advice to others. Some of the motivation may also be spiritual because the Jewish scriptures, in teaching love of neighbor, remind us to welcome strangers, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." In addition, many people we will meet have probably been "strangers" who benefited, at one time or another in their careers, from the kindness of others. Most people are willing to return the favor.

Let's also be honest. Networking isn't only a one-way street; it's an exchange of information. We all enjoy hearing lawyers' war stories and finding out what is happening within other segments of our professional community.

Whom Do I Talk To?
For a first step, take some time to browse the "social grid" below to trigger your memory about people within your legal and other social communities who might be able to offer you some advice. You will be amazed where you can pick up the information you need, not only about your new directions, but also the names of contacts within firms and corporations. As the saying goes, we are all only about five phone calls away from the White House. Whether true or not, never should we underestimate the power of connections. You will find resources among the familiar names in your law school alumni list-from lawyers of other firms with whom you have worked, from "professional friends," from people for whom you've done favors, from consultants, and from others likely to know many other people.

Douglas Richardson, in his excellent book *Networking,* suggests four general categories of potential contacts for self-marketing meetings:

(1) Personal - This group encompasses all those people outside of our profession or sphere of employment. They would generally be social connections, friends, neighbors, and relatives.

(2) Professional - These contacts are those rising from our work within the legal community. For example, lawyers we've been associated with at a firm, professional pals, or lawyers whom we've argued against in court, but who at the end of a trial may have gone out of their way to pay a sincere compliment.

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(3) Organizational - This category might overlap somewhat with our professional network, but it covers our social affiliations: business associations, boards of directors, faith communities, professional groups, sports partners, and the like.

(4) Opportunistic - These relationships are those resulting from chance encounters in life. These are people who are normally off our beaten path. They are accidental conversation partners we may never meet again: a particularly impressive speaker after a CLE meeting, someone with whom we've shared a drink in a bar or a row on a plane, stood beside in an elevator, talked to at a boring party, or met in some Internet chat forum.

A good way to trigger your memory about your in-place network is take a few quiet moments to scan through the categories in the Social Grid below. Start thinking about potential resources for your personal marketing research. Make a list of those people that might possibly be available to you for informal conversations from your personal, professional, and social lives.

MARKETING RESEARCH SOCIAL GRID			
Law School Classmates	Professional Friends	Former Legal Colleagues	Present Legal Associates
Judges and Court Administrators	Law School Alumni Directory	Former Legal Opposing Counsel	Sports or Fitness Pals
Business Associates	Corporate In-House Counsel Friends	Corporate Executives	Stockbrokers and Accountants
Bar Association Contacts	Other Bar Committee Members	Other Board of Directors Members	Legal Services Providers
Brehon Society Members	Justinian Society Members	The Corporate Legal Directory	Martindale-Hubbell Legal Directory
Law School Profs	Directories of Association Members	Workshop Presenters	Fraternity or Sorority Friends
Internet Contacts	Legal Websites and Forums	Faith Communities	Other Soccer Moms
Golfing Partners	Neighbors	Political Connections	Friends for Whom You've Done Favors
Other Civic Association Members	College Alumni Association Directory	College Roommates, Friends, Classmates	Other:

Where Do I Start?

You begin your informational conversations with "warm" contacts. These are the names that quickly came to mind as you browsed the Social Grid above. They could include professional friends, law school classmates, former employers, acquaintances, and business colleagues. It is critically important that, as you begin your self-marketing efforts, you meet first with several of these "friendlies," with people who know you, are easy to talk to, would be sympathetic to your career search, and most open to discussion.

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Why start with close friends? For all of the reasons given above, but particularly because you need to practice how you describe your professional experience and get your presentation skills up to an acceptable level. This way, in a low-risk setting, you can talk about your career directions and become comfortable with articulating your skills and accomplishments during self-marketing meetings.

Setting the Stage

1. Normally, you will write a letter first and then follow up with a phone call to your contact. Why not just a phone call instead of a letter? Cold calling is a technique used successfully by someone with sales experience, but networking is not a sales transaction. Writing a letter is also a safer, easier first step. It creates a more favorable first impression than a phone call. Additionally, you write a letter so that you control the process. In your letter, you set the ground rules and spell out before your phone call your expectations for the meeting.

This is a critically important step in the self-marketing process. The person you are calling must understand what you are about. Often, when receiving a career-search call unexpectedly, people will misinterpret your purpose. Either they do not really hear what you are saying, or you do not articulate clearly enough what you are requesting. In either case, your contact will immediately assume that what you want, here and now, is to where exactly to find a job.

So you must make it clear, right from the start, that the purpose of your meeting is advice, not job leads. That is why you normally write a letter beforehand, to break through the barrier of false assumptions and misconceptions. You must spell out clearly what you are asking and what you are not asking.

2. Next, carefully draft your marketing letter. A letter requesting your marketing meeting or informational interview should contain two critical elements:

a) You include some form of a "disclaimer." This clear statement explains what you are and what you are not about. You are not asking for job leads; you are just seeking a little friendly advice, some information. You can say this in a couple of different ways, but in general, you tell your contacts, truthfully, that you're doing "marketing research" to help you make valid career choices and find your right direction.

b) You do not include your resume. When you send along a resume with your letter, you are sending the recipient a mixed message. You're not seeking a job from this meeting; you're looking for information. A resume screams, "Please hire me! Please hire me!" We'll explain later how you can leave your resume at the end of the meeting without contaminating the primary purpose of the informational meeting.

How to Make the Follow-up Phone Call

Confirm this letter within a few (3-4) days with a phone call to schedule your meeting. Remember that the more comfortable, friendly, and relaxed you sound, the more likely will you be able to connect. Your letter can also serve as the cue card for this interview-scheduling call.

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Frequently Asked Questions

1. Are there any exceptions to your insistence on the "mail first, call later" protocol?

Certainly, especially when setting up meetings with your "friendlies." If your contact is someone you know very well-a college roommate, a neighbor, a drinking buddy, or a good friend from a previous job-sending a letter could be a bit formal. So just pick up the phone and call. However, make sure that the person you are calling is clear as to the purpose of your call. If there is any doubt as to whether or not a person is close enough to be considered a "warm" contact, then write the letter.

2. Could I send an e-mail request rather than a formal letter?

Do you want to be mistaken for SPAM? Most of us do not take the time to read half of our morning emails. We just check the topic header and delete those that appear to be ads or those that look suspiciously like a virus. Besides, from the nature of the beast, email messages seem somehow too transitory. A personal letter is a bit more formal. It sits there on the desk. It is more hands-on-something to put down, pick up, read over again, and think about.

3. My schedule is tight and the only time I really have for self-marketing meetings is maybe once a week over lunch. What to you think?

You do what you can do. Ideally, these self-marketing meetings are better suited to quieter, more formal settings than restaurants during lunchtime-fewer distractions, easier to talk, more focused. If mealtime is your only free time, then why not a breakfast meeting? An early breakfast with a colleague-toast, coffee, and juice-usually means a quieter atmosphere, less food, and more time to talk.

4. How do I bypass voice mail?

This is more easily said than done. First, try calling before or after normal working hours, early in the morning, or late afternoon. If you are still routed to your potential contact's voice mail, then leave a message every couple of days or so and try to locate that particular person's email. Firm and corporate websites sometimes identify email addresses. Even if you risk being mistaken for spam, keep trying; the "squeaky wheel" theory still applies.

5. Suppose my contact asks me to mail in my resume before the meeting?

You say "sure" and mail the resume. Nevertheless, use the person's request as an opportunity to remind him or her again that at this stage of your career search, you are not asking for a job, only for information.

Will People Really Talk To Me?

Absolutely. But there are no guarantees due to the differences in clients' career histories, the great number of variables in individual lawyers' abilities, the kinds of contacts being networked, and the shifting nature of the legal job climate. However, as a general rule, once a client has developed his or her skills, he or she should expect to be talking to a good percentage of contacts for letters

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mailed. Forty percent is not an unrealistic expectation for a general job search. This response rate seems to run even higher for members of the legal profession. Lawyers will take time to talk to members of their own profession, particularly if there exists some kind of a nexus-same law school, similar career backgrounds, or common friends. If you follow the guidelines discussed in this article, your networking strategy can yield surprisingly great results.