

Second Class Student

It's not me, it's you.

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A Student Lawyer's Guide to Networking, Job Nabbing and General Brown Nosing

By

Kirk Charles Simoneau, Esq.¹

And so, the article begins humorously

Sadly, there have been many tomes (great big books) written about effective networking. I become maudlin thinking that some academics, authors and even pundits have spent careers dissecting, diagraming and discussing the simplest form of human interaction - small talk. Don't get me wrong, I recognize the irony of this article, but, in my defense, I've got a comparatively small word count. I also recognize that speaking in public, and to strangers, is one of mankind's greatest phobias. And I've seen the prescriptions of Ativan to prove it. Not everyone is at ease chatting. I know I'm not. To the untrained eye, I appear at ease, but I'm just well-rehearsed, in a Dick Van Dyke tripping over the ottoman kind of way. With some luck, I'll help you appear at ease too.

For many, networking is a dirty word invoking images of awkward conversations had by awkward people about awkward subjects while trying to awkwardly juggle awkward finger food. They're right. For most, networking is such a self-serving endeavor that it is uncomfortable for all involved. Only small children and their parents are comfortable with the "gimme, gimme,

¹ Attorney Simoneau is the managing partner of Nixon, Vogleman, Barry, Slawsky & Simoneau P.A. a boutique trial law firm specializing in representing the "little" guy. He made partner 1 year and 2 weeks from the date of his admittance to the bar, so, maybe, he knows something about how to power network. Maybe not. If you are interested in cyber stalking him, his email is ksimoneau@davenixonlaw.com.

gimme” scenario and then only because of a slowly evolving immunity built since infancy and the hope that, one day, the roles will reverse. When you are in anything just for yourself, it creates inelegance. That is amplified if the something you are in for yourself is as mundane as a conversation. You do need to have a goal when networking, but the goal, shouldn’t be to get a job, land an interview or meet 100 people in 60 minutes. You should have more altruistic, or, at least, neutral goals. How about trying to make a friend? Finding one person you have something weird in common with? Finding someone (perhaps a potential employer) with a problem you can solve? It’s a subtle, but important, difference. And an attitude of servitude does make all the difference. It’s the difference between the politician you voted for because he had “passion” and the one you picketed against because he seemed “phony.”

Networking gets a bad rap because people have ridiculously narcissistic goals. I’ve seen unemployed people turn away from an interesting conversation at a “networking event” because no one taking part in the dialogue was a hiring manager. “Oh, you’re looking for work, too. Well, I’ve got to go find someone important to talk to. Bye.” Sound vaguely familiar? Imagine, instead, a continued conversation during which you share resources, war stories and leads. Maybe that other job hunter knows of a perfect spot for you, a spot that wasn’t right for her. Maybe you know of a perfect spot for her. This is a very small world and, believe it or not, being genuinely nice and helpful is powerful networking. It isn’t about you, it’s about me, whoever the “me” is that isn’t you. You aren’t that interesting, funny or charming. I am, whoever “I” happen to be.

This article, though, is supposed to supply the would-be networker helpful, practical tips, not philosophical points of view about being a good guy. What follows are those tips. They have worked for me. I’m not a genius lawyer, interesting, funny or charming, but I did advance from associate to managing partner of a U.S. News and World Report Top Tier Plaintiff’s Trial Firm just one year and two weeks after graduating law school. Maybe, just maybe, I know where of I speak. After all, that’s what the footnote says.

KIRK'S TIPS

Show People are the Greatest People on Earth – just ask ‘em

First, consider your state of mind. Too often, we approach our daily lives mindlessly. We approach most moments without considering how we'll approach them. We just go to class. We just go out with friends. We just do a lot of things. Life is not a Nike commercial. An effective networker understands every time he heads out, whether to the store, class or to a “networking event;” it's a performance. I know this seems to put us back in the camp of the narcissist. After all, who is more narcissistic than show folk? The truth is for the job seeking law student, every moment is a possible networking moment. Every action should be purposeful. Most truly successful people understand the power of perception and that all the world, as Shakespeare told us and Elvis showed us, is a stage. You should be careful what you do and what you say. Don't be rude to a sales clerk, waitress or that driver in the Mercedes in front of you. The sales clerk's dad is the hiring partner at a Big 100 firm. The waitress is dating the hiring partner at a Big 100 firm. Oh, and the driver is the hiring partner at a Big 100 firm. Instead, put your best self forward. Doing that means recognizing, before you head out, that you have a best self. It means deciding you are going to act like the kind of person other people would want to be around. And, yes, this may be simple advice, but it isn't stupid advice. It also isn't often followed which is why those who follow it stand out and succeed.

Gee, you look nice tonight

Carefully select your wardrobe - always. Seldom will you see a great networker, or any really successful person, wearing a ball cap and sweat pants. What part am I auditioning for? It is always better to be overdressed than underdressed. After all, you may have just come from or are heading to someplace important. This doesn't mean you dress formally for what will clearly be a casual event. Just don't dress super casual. I actually have a “uniform” of sorts. I, almost always, wear a button down dress shirt (nice golf shirt in warmer weather), a sports coat, blue jeans and bright red sneakers. Not dressy. Sometimes too casual, but always memorable and thought out, carefully selected. So, if you wear the ball cap and sweat pants, fine, I guess, but think it through and understand why. I'm a different breed of lawyer and my “look”

communicates that clearly, plainly and directly. The coat is Armani, so I must be good at what I do. What does your “look” communicate?

And yes, I understand how superficial this all sounds, but I’m not trying to change the world, I’m trying to educate you about how it works. And, as we’re discussing education, this article is geared to law students, I have to ask, why are so many of you wearing hats to class? Who teaches law school? Lawyers teach law school. In addition to full time professors, your campus is crawling with adjuncts and visiting lawyers. All of who (is it whom?) you can meet. All of whom (is it who?) can help you get a job. You needn’t wear a suit everywhere and you’d better not steal the red sneaker thing, but don’t go to class looking like a slob. It is a professional school, look professional.

This idea of how you dress applies beyond heading to some event and class. As discussed in the first tip, you never know when you are going to meet someone that could be a help, or, more to our point, that you could help. Ask for help, turn someone into your new babysitter. Give help, make a friend. Don’t look like a slob just because you are going to the grocery store or running errands. Show some effort and you’ll, eventually, be rewarded. Think about your uniform. The point is to dress for the job you want, not the job you have. What does that guy, the one in the corner office, wear on the weekends or to the store? I bet he isn’t wearing a ball cap and sweat pants.

One for the road

Unless you’re Peter O’Toole, don’t drink at any networking event. Don’t have a drink beforehand to loosen up. Don’t have a drink while at the event. If you feel super uncomfortable because everyone else is drinking and you are not, you may have bigger problems than how to effectively network and should try to network with my friend Bill W. If you must drink, stay away from hard liquor and have a single drink. This isn’t so much about losing control, though that can happen, it is about demonstrating self-control. Get drunk and get a reputation. Get tipsy and get a reputation. Drink and drive home afterwards and get a criminal record. Bottom line, I want you at your best, alcohol, while widely believed it to be a mood enhancer, is actually a depressant. Literally, alcohol has a depressant effect on your chemical system. Here and now, you really need to not be a downer.

I also like the idea of having your hands free to shake those of others. I hate the idea of you wiping the moisture from the glass off on you pant leg before you shake hands. Classy. While we are on the subject of what not to do with your hands, don't answer a phone call or text. A drink at an event is for the established people not for those trying to get a leg up. Taking a call is for important people, not you. I may be impressed if I see someone who can "hold their liquor," but it isn't the kind of impressed that gets a job offer. A reputation, of whatever character, once built is nearly impossible to dismantle.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall?

Prepare your script. I told you I'm well-rehearsed. All good networkers are. Sometime, early on, the rehearsal was formal. When I was a teenage boy, calling girls for the first time, I used a set list; an outline of the subjects I would cover and that I had worked through the language of in advance. Laugh if you want, but if you saw my beautiful wife, you wouldn't doubt how well this worked out for me. Later, rehearsal is more commonplace. Now, I just think of a couple of interesting stories to tell; well repeated stories that have been well received, not new ones. Networking time is not the time to test new material. You should be telling stories your friends and family have enjoyed. Stories you used on that last really successful job interview.

You'll need two basic scripts, things to talk about; an all about you script or elevator speech and a general conversation script. I hope you understand I don't mean a verbatim, memorized Broadway script, unless you are Andrew Loyld Webber, in which case I loved you to read my sequel to Cats, it's called Kittens and the whole six hours takes place in a cardboard box. You just need a general understanding of what you'll talk about, the stories you'll tell, don't worry about the exact words.

For the general conversation script you'll need a newspaper or a news app. If you read every above the fold headline of every section and, generally, the first paragraph of those articles before heading to any "event," you'll know just enough about what's happening in the world and its various subsections to not sound like a moron. I use USA Today because it is a short paper and I can't understand the vocabulary in the New York Times. The total time investment is 20 minutes. Whatever news source you prefer, you want to avoid the opinion sections. A

networking event is not the place to have opinions. It's a place to be intelligent, well informed and charming, not to state your position on abortion, global warming and gay marriage. Of course, there is another approach. You tackle those tough issues, but you'll leave the event with a much smaller collection of acquaintances and even those who agree with you will wonder why you talked about such stuff in that environment. Time and place are important concepts, but so is having quality, to you, contacts. Dealer's choice; whatever approach you use, pay attention to those stories with the most human appeal, the type that people will want to repeat. With every repetition, you are remembered.

The about you speech is, for most of us, much harder. It comes after the question, "so, what do you do?" In America, this means to discuss to your job, your work. In Europe, in actually means to discuss your life, your family, or your real passions. I prefer the European model for informal occasions, but at real networking events, those designed to meet and greet, I encourage you to be 100% American. And yes, you understand this correctly, you should have two versions of the "who I am" elevator speech. One is about what year in school you are, what kind of work you want and the like. The other is about the trip you took to El Salvador to build houses for that village destroyed by that storm last year. Both, though, should highlight what you can and will do for others, not what you want others to do for you.

Imagine this, you are the managing partner of the best trial firm in the State, with the highest per partner revenue and every student you meet wants to be your summer associate. You've asked two students that time tested question, "What kind of law do you want to practice?" Donnie Don't responds, "I've always wanted to be a trial lawyer and I heard you guys are the best, so am I, I'm first in my class and I'd love to work with you for the summer. Do you have any openings and how do I apply?" Donnie Do responds, "I haven't fully committed to an area yet, but in my last year of high school I was on the mock trial team and I came in second in the State. The challenge of preparing for that trial for months and then seeing it unfold in front of me in ways I'd predicted and ways I didn't predict and then reacting to the unexpected was just an amazing feeling. Do you get that feeling in court?"

The important difference between the two responses is twofold. The substance of one, you figure out which, describes hard work, commitment and accomplishment earned over time, the other is pandering. The second distinction, which is more important, is the shift. Each ends

with a question, but only one question both expands and continues the conversation while allowing the listener to tell you about her. “Do you get that feeling in court?” invites a war story. It invites advice. It invites the chance to ask that lawyer more questions about them. Here’s the ultimate secret in life. If the other person does most of the talking, when you leave, she will believe you are as smart as she thinks she is. After all, you smiled, nodded and laughed at all the right moments. Her voice, for the time being, will be your voice. Later, find out if there are jobs on the firm website, not now.

Okay, so maybe it is stalking, but...

After the event, following up is important. If you promised to send someone an article, do it right away. If you didn’t, but someone mentioned a subject he loves, let’s say antique cars, send an article. If you want to find out about a job, here’s the formula: send a handwritten note reciting how nice it was to have met him and that you found his advice to be very thought provoking and you’d love it if he could spare the time for a cup of coffee next week. Most importantly, you end the note saying when you’ll call to make the appointment. You don’t email, you don’t text, you call to make the appointment. As an extra, non-networking, tip, to get passed his gatekeeper, all you have to say is that Mr. Important is expecting your call. It’s true; it was in your note and everything. So, when you have that cup of coffee, that’s the time to be open about needing work. Be honest, you are looking for a summer gig, an associate job, or whatever and ask if he can think of three people you should talk to for advice about your hunt. When you call those three people, you can say that Mr. Important told you to call. It’s true.

No matter what you do, send the people you’d most like to know, a handwritten note. If you don’t want to meet again soon or don’t need work, great, but send a nice note. Years later, it’ll pay way more than postage in dividends.

I’m still scared

If you are still uncertain about your game plan, bring a friend and turn the whole thing into a game. Compete to find the most interesting person, judged based upon a comparison of anecdotes afterwards. See who can use the word “boondoggle” in the most conversations. Don’t see who can get the most business cards. Networking well is about quality not quantity. Eventually, you’ll be calling on these people and you want them to genuinely remember who you

are and to have a fond recollection. Maybe focusing on the competition will ease your anxiety, maybe not.

The ending isn't so funny

In the end, this subject could fill a tome (a great big book), but it really just boils down to the Golden Rule, practice it and have a consciousness of the needs, and perceptions, of others and you'll succeed. In other words, think to yourself, "it's not me, it's you." These words are great for splitting up and getting together. If you don't know what the Golden Rule is, networking is so not your problem. Good luck and, please, don't call me for a job. Your Friend, Kirk.