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Working a room

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For many junior (and even some senior) lawyers, the prospect of walking into a room full of strangers, striking up conversations, and coming away with some real business value, can seem daunting, and even anxiety-producing. But "working a room" is one of the staples of business development. And it can be learned. This article offers a few initial insights.

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What's The Point?

The Johnny Appleseed myth suggests that working a room means spreading out and making as many contacts as possible, handing each new acquaintance a business card, and then moving on. Resist that myth. The real object almost always is to find a few good quality contacts, and to spend enough time with each to learn about their needs and interests, and leave a favorable impression. Consider these tips:

- Do some research. Get the guest list in advance, if you can. Look for anyone you know, and anyone you might like to know. Consider whether any of your current acquaintances might help introduce you to some potentially valuable contacts.
- Budget your time. Don't expect more than one or two meaningful conversations in any 60-90 minute gathering.
- Identify a personal goal for each encounter. For example: identify one interesting fact about each person you meet. Ask at least one meaningful question about each person's business, or background. See how much you can get each person to talk about themselves (a 60/40 them/you ratio, or better). These kinds of personal goals can keep you focused, and give an impression of interest and enthusiasm.

Plan Your Approach, Before You Start

The terrain of a room (or rooms) will often determine the strategies most appropriate to satisfy your goals. A quick stroll and survey of the scene, before you begin, can help you organize the campaign. Consider:

- Crowded rooms tend to produce clumps of people, often difficult to penetrate. Look for opportunities on the fringes of the room, or in the entrance hall.
- Some locations naturally draw individuals, more available for conversation. A check-in table may be ideal, as is the bar. You need not stake out these locations, but when at liberty, you might gravitate toward them, to increase your chances of striking up another conversation.
- Do not sit down. Sitting reduces your profile, for others to recognize and engage with you. If you must sit down (for a meal or formal program), pick a spot early, and place a coat or some other token of your place-holding, at a largely empty table. You can invite others to join you at "your" table, or pick up and move your belongings, to join an interesting table companion.

Mind Your Appearance

First impressions are important. You want to display confi-

dence, interest and approachability. Consider:

- Wear a smile. Maintain eye contact. Feel free to enjoy yourself. When in doubt, say something positive: "What a swell party." "Wow, I have learned a lot at this conference." Stay upbeat.
- Dress neatly. Over-dress, if you're unsure. You can always remove a tie or jacket, if the ambiance seems more informal.
- Don't over-load on food, or drinks. Eat only bite-sized appetizers while standing up. Drink alcohol in moderation. Keep your drink in your left hand, freeing the right hand for handshakes (without the chill of ice on the skin).

Develop Standard Approaches To "Cold" Rooms

Even in the "coldest" of rooms (where you know virtually no one) you can use some standard approaches to begin conversations:

- Greet the host (or person who invited you). Give a "thank you," and ask to be introduced to guests who might share your interests.
- Greet the guest speaker(s), before the presentation, and ask whether one of your interests will be addressed in the talk.
- Approach other "singles" in the crowd. Be candid: "I really don't know anyone here. Do you?" Again, ask for help with introductions.
- Make sure you have your 20-second self-description ready for everyone you meet: "I'm Jane Smith. I'm a tax lawyer at Smith & Smith. What brings you to this event?

Plan Your Exit

Good quality conversations usually take 15-20 minutes. After that time, both you and your conversation-mate may begin to feel some pressure to disengage. Make the process comfortable for you both.

- Give a thank you, and suggest a follow-up. "I really enjoyed talking with you. May I have your card?" If appropriate, suggest a specific step: "I'll give a call next week about _____."
- Give yourself a legitimate excuse to leave. Carry a near-empty glass, and break off for a re-fill or note that you really must say thank you to the host before the event ends. Do not constantly scan the crowd, looking for a better companion, and abruptly depart.
- If possible, offer help to your companion before you go: "Would you like me to introduce you to John Jones?"

Close The Loop

Even the best introductions serve little purpose if you do not follow-up. Give yourself assignments, to be performed after an event:

- Write some brief notes on everyone you met, including any significant discussions you had.
- Enter contact information in your contacts list.
- If the contact is a potential client, run a conflicts check. Speak to your firm colleagues about the contact.
- Follow up, promptly, with a note, call or email. The message need not be more than "great to meet you." Keep track of contacts, and regularly send them invitations to events of interest, and offer to send publications in their focus area.

Conclusion

First meetings in group settings require a combination of planning and a recognition that "meet and greet" events involve a healthy element of random activity. You never know who you might meet, what interests you might share, or the strength of the connections you may make. Have fun. Enjoy the adventure. Surprise yourself.

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