

Walk Over and Say Hello to Somebody

During these summer weeks, law students should meet, greet, and build up networks.

BY ARI KAPLAN

With all the new ways to stay connected through technology, “meeting people in person is becoming a lost art.” So says Thomas Bundy III, chairman of the Young Lawyers Section of the Bar Association of the District of Columbia. To buck that trend, Bundy is inviting summer associates throughout the District to his section’s “Networking 101: Secrets of Summers’ Success” event at MCCXXIII, a D.C. night club, this Thursday.

Bundy’s goal is to gather as many people as possible and give them the chance to meet one another face to face: “This is an opportunity to get to know someone outside of a computer.”

His inspiration for party planning: a good friend who participated in a summer event a decade ago and still stays in contact with people he met. Bundy, who is a partner with Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan, points out that those who achieve the most career success have honed their ability to connect with others.

And there’s no better time than during your summer associate stint.

MEET LAW FIRM INSIDERS

First, listen closely to a variety of voices. And by a variety of voices, I mean not just practicing lawyers.

Most summer associates understand that they should meet peers who may be good referral sources or in-house contacts many years from now, but few appreciate the tremendous value of speaking to nonlegal personnel working at the firm. Members of the marketing department, as well as staff

focused on business and professional development, can be great resources.

It shouldn’t be hard to talk to them: They’re highly communicative. They also have a deep understanding of the firm’s culture. Learn from the inside how branding impacts the firm’s decisions or what the most successful rainmakers do and how to emulate them.

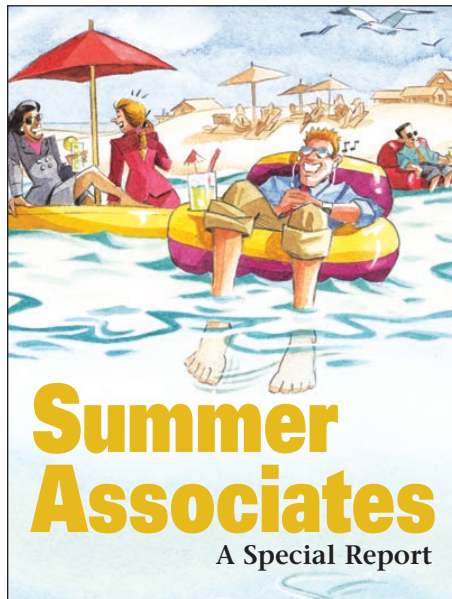
Nonlawyer (or nonpracticing) insiders are a great source of insight because “we might be able to answer questions summer associates would not necessarily want to ask people who are evaluating them,” says Alice Rodd O’Rourke, chief marketing officer for Day Pitney.

Moreover, people on the marketing and development teams work with a wide range of lawyers in multiple practice groups. “We see a broad spectrum of the behaviors that work and don’t work in building a practice,” O’Rourke adds. With that knowledge, they can help you with background information on partners’ work styles, provide history on former summer associates, and steer you toward the right contacts on the hiring committee.

Talking to nonlawyers will ensure that you acquire perspective as well as knowledge this summer. And take notes.

STAY IN TOUCH

That’s right. While you’re searching for scavenger hunt items and learning how to bill time, take notes on key dates in the lives of those with whom you interact. If someone casually mentions that it’s his birthday, write it down. If the recruiting director reveals that she is approaching her fifth anniversary with the firm in the fall, record that thought. Add these dates, and others like them,



to your calendar. And don't forget to add some identifying information: "Carolyn Smith, worked on ABC memo, taught English in Japan."

If you're still clinging to a paper view of the next 12 months, consider migrating to Outlook or an online tool connected to your e-mail account. Both Google and Yahoo offer seamless integration between their calendaring and e-mail systems. "You don't have to remember everything. Let the electronic calendar do it for you," advises time management guru Irwin Karp of Productive Time. "If you want to send a card, add it in a few days before."

Now imagine that the summer has ended and you're not sure how to stay in touch with many of the people you met. Then you receive an e-mail reminder that it is a contact's birthday (based on a notation you made and promptly forgot about in July). This is a great opportunity if the birthday belongs to someone with whom you worked well over the summer, but it's even better if you did not make such a strong impression. It gives you a second chance. It makes the most recent memory of you a positive one.

MAKE CONVERSATION

Wanting to make a strong impression and making a strong impression are not, of course, the same thing. Inevitably you will find yourself stumbling through a labored conversation at a firm-sponsored cocktail party or a barbecue at a partner's home. The problem: You tried to wing it. Bad idea, says Nancy Fox of Fox Coaching Associates.

Fox recommends attending every event with a bank of open-ended questions that you can ask to help generate a dialogue. Avoid questions requiring short answers.

Question: "How long have you been at the firm?" Answer: "Four years." (Insert awkward silence here while you desperately try to think of the next thing to say.)

Instead, ask people to tell you about something. "As soon as you say, 'Tell me about ...,' says Fox, "people will tell you about whatever it is you are asking them." She actually does research before every professional event she attends to come up with possible topics.

Allow conversations to progress by starting off with lighter matters (e.g., the food, the event itself) and then graduating to more involved concepts (e.g., your background, your summer experience at the firm). Lawyers' instinct is to try to control the pace of conversation with questions that elicit one-word answers, similar to a deposition, but networking requires a more balanced flow.

To learn more about your fellow attendees, ask the recruiting coordinator to fill you in on those who have RSVP'd. Also, "find out what the code and tempo of the room will be," Fox says. Talking business may be less appropriate at a Saturday barbecue than at a Tuesday conference-room lunch. Either way, "sound smart by asking smart questions," she advises.

While the obvious approach, attending events is not the only way to interact with prospective contacts in your city or region. David Schnurman, president of Lawline.com, recommends doing something that will pique other people's interest in speaking with you. "Create a blog or write an article about the legal aspects of something and call anyone you want asking him or her to speak with you," says Schnurman, who graduated from New York Law School in 2006. Interviewing others lets you get to know them, their work, and their interests in a positive way, he says. It is so effective that he created TrueNYC, a public access cable show on which he interviews entrepreneurs.

But "be very concerned with attention spans," Schnurman cautions. Recognize when it's time to end the conversation and fight the all-too-human urge to use the discussion for your own catharsis. "Speak less and listen more." In fact, the key to a great conversation is the follow-up questions, ones that demonstrate your attention and insight.

Schnurman also has some advice for those networking at parties. "Your goal should be to meet one person, not the entire room," he says. "If someone is talking to you, avoid rudely looking off to the right at another prospect."

Think in terms of a few meaningful connections, rather than large numbers of contacts. If you build the foundation for one strong relationship after each event you attend this summer, you could create an entire club.

NETWORK YOUR NETWORK

In fact, consider harnessing the power of your network into a breakfast club—or a morning coffee club—this summer. Be the catalyst. "When you are organizing an event, you have a personal stake in it," says Bundy, who is eager to see his inaugural networking event come to fruition.

Start meeting people and sharing experiences and gathering contact information today, so that as your career develops, so will your relationships. Remember that it's much easier to call someone you have known for years than for months. When you're engaged in the process this summer, focus on that valuable time horizon more than the momentary anxiety.

Whether you're studying Networking 101 this Thursday or advanced rainmaking throughout your entire career, the idea is the same: Create meaningful opportunities to connect and then find genuine ways to follow up.

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