

Top Ten Dumb Networking Mistakes

{© Cheryl Rich Heisler, Lawternatives}

Networking is not hard—but it is easy to screw it up. So here is a list of the top ten things NOT to do while you are networking your way around a new career:

1. Don't ask/expect for a networking meeting to turn into a job offer.

Sure, it can happen—but if you go into the meeting with that mindset you will only be disappointed. Even worse, an interviewer can sense when he's been "baited and switched" and will understandably hold back on sharing information and leads with someone who can't be trusted. You are now in a lose-lose situation of your own design.

2. Don't tell your networking contact that you've "heard it all before" .

If you are such an expert on the topic at hand, then why bother eating up someone else's time? When somebody asks my advice (and then tells me they already know everything I've told them) I may understand that they are just being defensive. Nevertheless, with that attitude, I certainly won't be asking any of my contacts to help.

3. Don't be a name dropper.

Of course you need to share the name of any mutual acquaintances who put you in touch with the networking contact, but beyond that, dropping high-level industry names without a really good reason makes you appear all fluff and no substance.

4. Don't think that your law degree by itself is enough to impress anyone outside the law.

A J.D. is a wonderful degree. It tells the world that you are smart, accomplished, industrious, disciplined...but it does not qualify you to lord your background over someone else, especially when that someone else has industry-specific knowledge of the subject in question. Lots of lawyers goof here—and they turn off the very people with whom they need to connect.

5. Don't forget to show up.

Believe it or not, this has actually happened—more than once. If the information you hope to get isn't important enough to be an "inked-in" entry in your calendar, don't involve anyone else!

6. Don't act like it's no big deal.

Related to #5 above, if you are asking someone else to help you, then help yourself! Do your homework, study the industry, put on some clean, appropriate clothes, show up on time and take a few notes. A follow-up thank you note, e-mail or call is also the classy thing to do.

7. Don't chew gum.

Or smoke. Or drink (except maybe one beer or glass of wine if the meeting is taking place after work at the local bar.) This meeting is still business, even if informal, and you definitely need to make an excellent impression to get to the next level.

8. Don't turn the meeting into a therapy session.

This contact is an expert in his/her industry, not in the mental health arena. Your problems, unrelated to this one part of the job hunt, are not on the table for discussion.

9. Don't leave the meeting empty-handed.

Networking works because of the geometric progression built in to the model. One contact should yield two more, two should grow to four, etc. If the new contact information comes in the form of a trade association, or publication or upcoming seminar instead of another individual contact, fine. But the network has to grow. Your time is too valuable to go away from any networking session without at least one new learning. Even if you learn something you don't like or don't want to hear, at least you haven't wasted anyone's time in the process.

10. Don't forget the most important question of all; what else should I be asking?

Ending with an open-ended question like this can often open a flood gate of great information.