



Networking: Don't Just Do It - Do It Well
How to Network Your Way to Effective Relationship-Building

By: Kristin Rizzo, Esq.

[Kristin Rizzo is a graduate of University of San Diego School of Law, serves on the Law Alumni Association Board of Directors, and is an active participant in the USD Law Connect program.]



After graduating from law school, passing the Bar exam, and of course – getting a job, networking is one of the most important things you can do to ensure your success as an attorney. I know most of you have probably been told that networking is definitely something every law student should be doing; and, yes, I believe this to be true. However, I not only encourage you to network, but implore you to network with skill – so don't just network – network well.

Networking – or as I tend to think of it, navigating – my way through the legal community, has been the best thing I have done for my career. Why? Simple. Every single one of my legal internships, clerkships and attorney jobs were borne from some connection, some conversation, some person with whom I met along the way. Each rung on the ladder, helping me to climb to the next position in my career, has been built through person-to-person networking. And I am so pleased that USD School of Law offers its students so many opportunities to network with alumni, through its Law Connect program, and other alumni networking events; so please take advantage!

I. Networking – What is it?

Before we explore effective networking, let's briefly discuss networking in general. Merriam Webster defines "networking" as "the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business." I love this definition! Networking to me can be any number of things – whether it is going to an event and schmoozing, connecting via social networking websites, being introduced to someone and having a conversation or planning a meeting with an old friend or a family-friend you've never met; networking is about making connections, i.e. building relationships.

For you law students, networking should be about building relationships with legal practitioners to achieve a variety of goals. Of course, one major goal is to obtain a job, and networking with attorneys can definitely help you do this. But, think about other goals of networking – for example, meeting someone who practices in an area you are interested in and setting up monthly lunches, or obtaining a mentorship with someone who might impart some

of their wisdom. Connecting with people will open doors; some doors will be obvious and some, you probably never knew existed.

II. Networking – The Importance of Building Connections

I don't claim to be a networking guru, but, I have been fortunate enough to have achieved many benefits from networking. In preparation for writing this letter, I thought a lot about what I have done to network, and what I have found to be successful. I believe the key to my networking success is my ability to build connections, by devoting myself to capturing every opportunity and achieving results. When I was fortunate enough to obtain an internship or clerkship, I worked hard and committed myself daily because I suspected – rightly – that someone would notice. And, they did. Let me give you some examples from my life:

Opportunity (A) – During law school, I was interning with a government agency. One day, a group of us interns were introduced to a federal magistrate judge. After meeting this judge, and hearing her talk about “grabbing opportunities,” I was so inspired by this judge, that I tried to grab an opportunity right then and there; I approached her to inquire about any externship possibilities in her courtroom. The judge told me that she rarely hired externs, but was inspired by my enthusiasm and advised me to send her my materials. That fortuitous meeting turned into a federal court externship. Of course, the externship was borne out of me being in the right place at the right time, but I also believe my enthusiasm and direct approach was something she valued – at least enough to look at my resume, writing sample and law school transcripts.

Opportunity (B) – As my first summer clerkship was concluding, I was told that the firm did not have the resources to hire me full-time. Needless to say, I was greatly disappointed. But, in that same conversation, one of the partners told me that I had performed so well, and seemed so dedicated to the practice of law, that he wanted to help me. And help me, he did. That partner made a call to another partner of another firm and that day I was called into an interview. That interview resulted in me receiving another internship and eventually, an offer for my first attorney job. I was clearly very fortunate to have received this type of connection – but I believe my hard work is what prompted this partner to help me connect to another firm.

I cite these two examples of how networking propelled me into various internships, clerkships and jobs, because they demonstrate to me how “networking” really works. Opportunity (A) was a chance right place/right time situation, but the connection I made with the judge was as a result of spotting an opportunity, and “grabbing” onto a possible connection. Opportunity (B) was obtained through a semester of hard work – yes – but, again, allowed me to make a connection with a partner, and that partner helped me to make another connection.

I have been surprised and humbled at the success I have obtained from my connection-building in the San Diego legal community. Lawyers do value meeting someone who has enthusiasm and drive. Lawyers do want to impart their knowledge to thirsty law students. Lawyers do want to help law students and fellow lawyers succeed. So, I implore you to work hard and make the effort to build genuine connections within the legal community - you will be rewarded!

III. Networking – Tips for Successful Networking

So, if networking is about building connections, how does one successfully build connections in the legal community? As hopefully I have demonstrated, networking is not just about attending an event or linking with someone via social media; it is a continuous effort to build connections and relationships within the legal community.

Here are some things that have helped me network efficiently and effectively. I hope these tips will help you too.

Know Your Networking Goals. When networking, you should be aware of both your short-term and long-term networking goals. A short-term goal might be attending a legal community event (i.e. through a Bar Association, legal group or Alumni program) to meet one lawyer. Don't just go to an event to go to an event; make your time worth it. Your long-term goals should be focused on what type of law you want to practice, building a fulfilling mentorship connection, or getting a job. Manage your short-term goals in connection with your long-term goals to develop a networking plan.

Have a Great 10-second Opening or "Elevator Pitch". When networking, be prepared to introduce yourself and make a clear impression. Be ready and able to express who you are, what you do, and why you are there with this person in this moment. If you are a law student seeking the ultimate goal of obtaining a job, have a clear understanding of what type of work you are looking to obtain, or what area of practice you are interested in. If you already have a job, and are hoping to build connections, make sure you are ready to describe your area of practice or your legal goals and interests. Practice your introduction to get comfortable with it; be clear, concise, and above all, make a connection.

Get Comfortable with Your Discomfort. Very few people feel comfortable walking into a room of people they don't know. For most of us, this is difficult and intimidating; feeling this way is normal. Meeting people is hard; making connections is even harder. Maybe your first conversation is a bust, oh well – move on and try again.

Go Beyond the Computer Screen. Networking via social media websites can indeed help you build connections. If you know of an attorney or professional you want to connect with, linking on social media sites can be a good first step. But, like any first step, don't stop

there. Once you have made a connection, try to build on that connection. If you don't, you really don't have anything but a name on a computer screen. Take the relationship out of cyber-space and into a face-to-face conversation. Don't just send an email, introduce yourself and invite that person to meet you for coffee or lunch. If you see someone you've been wanting to meet at an event, go introduce yourself.

Get Involved and Stay Involved. Many people overlook significant opportunities to network. Networking possibilities are everywhere. Of course you can network at an event or social function, but you can also network through volunteering on a community service project, by getting involved with a committee or non-profit organization. One of my mentors once told me to be active in one legal organization and one non-legal/community-based organization, i.e. supporting the theater, the arts, helping the homeless, volunteering for kids' charities. This way, you build connections both within the legal community and with local groups as well. Believe it or not, organizations like lawyers. Non-profits and other community groups are often directed by a Board of Directors; these Boards are often looking for lawyers who can be of service. Take on leadership roles in these organizations; this is a great way to be visible and demonstrate knowledge of business and legal matters. So, look for possibilities to join groups and be useful. Relationships will flourish.

Build a Mentoring Relationship. One of the best connections you can have is one with a mentor. I have been lucky to be able to call on several mentors for a variety of things in my career development. Many legal organizations have mentoring programs for law students, where they will pair you with an attorney – or even a judge – in a traditional mentoring relationship. If you already have someone in mind, ask them if they would be willing to meet you over coffee or lunch, and ease into a mentoring relationship. An informal mentoring relationship may be more accessible than a formal one – but even an informal one is more valuable than none at all. Most lawyers and judges I know are flattered to be called upon in a mentoring capacity, and happy to share their wisdom and connections. Don't underestimate the connections you can make with your mentor and through their existing connections. One of my jobs was obtained because my mentor picked up the phone and called the partner of a law firm on my behalf. Make the most of your mentorship; take the reins on contacting them for the next meeting, asking them questions and following up with them with a sincere thank you. Make your mentorship work for you by putting in the effort and energy to keep it going. Mentors can be an invaluable resource.

Initiate the Post-Meeting Follow-Up. Following up with someone you networked with is so important. I recommend you always make sure to follow your connection with a thank you. Don't wait for people to follow-up with you. Let people know that you have appreciated the time they have spent with you, or the advice they gave you, or the person to whom they connected you. In addition to thanking them, you can use that opportunity to continue the connection by keeping the communication flowing. I often send personalized thank you notes, and if I see someone has won a trial or was honored with an award, I use that opportunity to

send them a congratulatory e-mail note. By staying on people's radar, you're more likely to build relationships.

There is Such a Thing as "Too Much" Networking. Remember, networking can help initiate connections, but it only goes so far in the legal community. You are first and foremost, a law student training to be a lawyer. Be known for being a hard-worker, a good researcher and writer, and someone dedicated to the practice of law. The goal of networking is to develop a good reputation, not to develop a reputation for being a schmoozer or partier. Build and maintain your reputation for doing your job and doing it well.

Be Genuine and Enjoy. When trying to build a connection, be genuine. Lawyers are busy people, and they do not want to waste time. When you have someone's attention, use it wisely – be focused, ask good questions, maintain eye contact, be in the moment. Too often, I go to events, or meet people, and their eye starts to wander around the room, or our conversation gets interrupted by someone else coming up to us. This can happen, but try to be the person who is focused on the conversation you are having at that moment. Trust me – being genuine and sincere goes a long way. And, enjoy where you are and what you are doing. If social events are not your thing, then find something else that better suits you. If you are not enjoying yourself, others won't enjoy being around you, and any chance of networking will fail. Life as a law student, and then life as a lawyer, is challenging enough – don't commit yourself to something you don't enjoy doing.

University of San Diego School of Law offers many opportunities for law students to network with local attorneys and judges. I encourage you to seek out these opportunities and build networking relationships of your own.

The upcoming Careers in the Law event on Wednesday, February 6, is the perfect opportunity to put your skills to work. You can register online. I look forward to meeting you at one of these upcoming networking opportunities!

Kristin Rizzo, Esq. '06.
Principal, The Rizzo Law Firm
Rizzo@RizzoFirm.com
(619) 333-0949