

Stop networking and start community building

Building a supporting network for your personal brand is critical to marketing your legal services

By Traci Stuart

The term "networking" has expanded to encompass all activities not directly related to work but that may, tangentially or eventually, lead to work. Any time spent away from the office can be designated as "networking." With this oversaturation and the lack of immediate gratification, many have grown tired of the standard networking activities. To be more successful with your extracurricular activities, it is beneficial to go beyond showing up to events and demonstrating your ability to balance a wine glass and shake hands. Why not use these opportunities to build and contribute to your community?

There's a solid business reason that applications to top universities across the nation require students to evidence their contributions to their communities to be considered for admission. Beyond bettering the community itself, these activities are the earliest and most basic form of networking – a skill set critical to developing business.

During their impressionable years, young adults who participate in community building activities are developing key skills that will help them later in life. In these volunteer settings, students have the opportunity to learn about the plights of others, see the inner workings or behind-the-scene efforts involved in different types of initiatives, practice communications, leadership and organizational skills, and meet and interact with a cross section of individuals. In short, it is a practice run for future business networking.

The attorney who diligently went to every bar association event for 20 years is like the straight-A student who spent all his free time alone playing video games. Whereas the attorney – young or old – who helped plan the event and donated his time, beyond the minimum, is the star, remembered by committee and community members and seen as a leader and a trusted resource. And yes, one could also say that he is a "good networker."

Further, it is a rare lawyer who claims to relish typical business networking opportunities. It feels too much like sales – a career many actively chose to avoid by going to law school. So stop networking and start building community.

For plaintiff lawyers, potential clients and the referral sources that drive business may harken from many different segments of your personal population. Those casting a narrower net would do well to be a bit more strategic in selecting community involvements. For example, a personal-injury lawyer who focuses on injuries sustained in athletics might opt to invest time in the high school's "booster club" or athletic fundraising arm. Such activity is even more worthwhile if you have genuine interest and passion for the issue at hand – say, a student at the school or a love of the game.

"Like" and "trust"

The beauty of community building over networking is that – more often than not – those met in the "community" context have a more well-rounded perspective of you. Sales and marketing surveys suggest that professional services "purchases" boil down to questions of "like" and "trust." When exposure to a lawyer comes in the context of volunteered time spent serving $1 hot dogs at the local horse track to raise money to get the soccer team new uniforms, the "like" and "trust" factors get a big boost.

Further, easy conversations exploring ties to the cause, common geography, thoughts on the sport, etc. happen in advance of the lawyerly (and oft-lamented) "elevator pitch." In thoughtfully building out your community, when the discussion naturally and casually turns to what you do professionally, you can be more personalized in explaining your practice to the individual to whom you are speaking.

Of course, community building – rather than networking – generally involves rolling up your shirt sleeves to get a job done – whether it's as basic as that volunteer hot dog-slinging gig, intellectually demanding, such as contributing to the drafting of an amicus brief, or assuming a higher profile role, like leading the charge in organizing an elementary school auction. When you are performing the work involved, potential clients and referral sources see you in action, get a sense of your professionalism and integrity, develop an impression of you personally, and ideally want to work with you. This is the best kind of network: people who can personally vouch for the fact that you're a pro.

It is likely you're already participating in activities that build your personal community, and you just haven't considered the business development potential. The best options include:

- ***Community service*** – Digging into the social and political issues in a community is often on a lawyer's "to do" list, but

Copyright © 2016 by the author.
For reprint permission, contact the publisher: **www.plaintiffmagazine.com**



finding the time can be a challenge. When one thinks strategically about such involvement and views them through a professional – as well as personal – lens of potential business contacts, the time commitment is now doing double duty.

Involvement in local groups like Rotary or Kiwanis brings you into contact with a range of community members – and, depending on the focus of your practice, this could be a solid investment. Volunteering gives you access to local membership rolls, which often includes franchise owners, real estate developers and regional business executives, among others. Building those relationships while doing something positive for the community in which you live will help build your personal brand and keep you top of mind when those professionals are looking to engage counsel.

• ***Professional communities*** – Joining a local bar association or trial lawyer association is a great relationship builder – particularly if the groups are where your referral sources (e.g., other lawyers) or potential clients volunteer. These groups also regularly revolve around shared work problems and solutions around which you can bond.

• ***Alumni communities*** – Whether it's your undergraduate alma mater or a former employer, alumni groups are active and prominent, especially in the context of LinkedIn and other social networks. These are relatively easy communities to build out. You already have a commonality, and from there, it's a matter of participating. This might mean you need to go to a regional mixer to reconnect with fellow alums or there may be opportunities to interact virtually, like in an online discussion group. These groups are often long-term investments that will pay out over time.

• ***Personal communities*** – Let's not forget the folks with whom you come into contact outside of the professional setting: neighbors, school groups, athletic teams, church groups, country clubs or gyms, businesses you patronize, fellow commuters, etc. All have the potential to become clients or referral sources. All form opinions of you when you interact. If you are already participating, why not make the most of these interactions?

Thanks to the internet, the lines between our professional and personal lives are continuing to blur, and it is increasingly difficult to silo our professional versus personal involvements. Building your personal brand (and a supporting network), both directly and online, is critical to legal business development.

Whether your brand is just a rich bio on the firm's website or a well-maintained social network that extends to LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and even Instagram, a focus on community building has the potential to both connect you and credential you. Rather than working to amass a huge collection of remote "contacts" you met once, start closer to home by truly leveraging the potential in your everyday interactions and involvements. Stop networking and start investing in community building so you can experience both personal and professional enrichment.


Stuart

Traci Stuart is the president of Blattel Communications*, a San Francisco-based communications agency. She can be reached at traci@blattel.com.*

Copyright © 2016 by the author.
For reprint permission, contact the publisher: **www.plaintiffmagazine.com**