

MANAGEMENT

How do you turn meaningless conversation into a potential business opportunity? **Andrew Bass** and **Paul Clusker** show you how to make a memorable impression for the right reasons in the first of two articles looking at how to cultivate new contacts

Keeping in touch

While most lawyers accept that networking and the cultivation of business relationships are crucial to a firm's competitiveness, many do not feel comfortable actually doing it. Furthermore, we have often heard that they are not really sure whether they are being effective and that they end up wondering whether it would have been better to do something else with their time.

The term networking itself is used too vaguely. It is important to make a distinction between two specific business development processes.

First, comes meeting new contacts and interacting with them before and up to a business card swap (which typically happens at specific events, seminars and so on). Second, is following up and cultivating the contact once it has been made and developing it as a source of direct business, or of referrals, introductions and market information.

Problems with the first phase are to do with skills and confidence, and are the topic of this article. Most people find the actions required in the second cultivation phase easy enough to perform. Once the interpersonal issues have been sorted out and the ice is broken the real business impact can be gained or lost; this is the topic of next week's article.

It is often the case that at client seminars, briefings and other 'networking' events, younger lawyers (and sometimes more senior colleagues) can be seen holding back from approaching 'strangers', or chatting among themselves around the buffet table. The potential negative effects are illustrated by this story, told to us by a colleague.

"I attended the opening of a law firm's new offices. I looked indistinguishable from their senior

corporate clients, although I was actually standing in for a client friend of mine. Amazingly, not one of the lawyers at the firm approached me all evening, even to find out if I was indeed a client, which was quite likely given that they did not recognise me and it was invitation-only.

"I eventually stood in the middle of the room and tried to look 'lost'. No-one came to my aid. I did not feel like a guest, and if I had been a client, would have left with a very bad impression, having had a thoroughly unpleasant evening."

In fairness, even experienced people have confessed that sometimes they enter a room, look around and, seeing everyone apparently engrossed in groups, want to head for the exit. But at best, holding back leads to lost opportunities, and at worst, it can actively create a bad impression.

There are two helpful attitudes to small-talk. Firstly, the attitude of a host: put other people at their ease and make them feel comfortable. This is especially important if it is your seminar, but you can still have the same attitude at someone else's event. Secondly, the attitude of a broker.

Inexperienced networkers often feel under pressure to sell to each person they meet at the first conversation. A much more productive attitude is to take the role of an introducer or broker. So your motivation can be "help me understand what you need, and what you offer, and maybe I can put you together with another of my contacts". If you effect a successful introduction, you are in credit with two parties, and if you become known as a broker, your networking will get easier as people seek you out.

There are five basic conversation skills to master:

1. Chatting comfortably

This step has to be addressed first. Before pushing people into talking to 'strangers', it is a good idea for them to know how to keep their end of a conversation up. Of course, sometimes you just 'click' and then there is no need to employ any conscious techniques, but if the conversation needs some help, there are various useful skills.

One of the most flexible is called 'questioning with a direction in mind'. The essence of this tactic is that in the early phases of a conversation it does not matter much what you talk about. What matters is the response of the other person. And the sort of response you want is of interest or enthusiasm.

Since you do not know in advance what they will be interested in, you have to ask questions and notice the response (rather than having clever things to say, or offering them the dreaded 'elevator pitch').

2. Starting a conversation with a stranger

Once you are more confident with your ability to chat, starting a conversation is much easier and just comes down to offering your hand and introducing yourself. There is not really a 'magic bullet' line. Almost any initial remark or question will do — it is the second and subsequent questions and direction that matter.

3. Joining a group

Firstly, it may be easier to start a conversation with someone standing on their own. If you do want to join a group, observe if they are in close rapport. If so, it is probably better to leave them to it. However, if they are standing in a way that is more open to the room, you can just ask "May I join you?"

4. Bailing out from a dead-end conversation

If they are a client of the firm, it is probably better, as their host, to try and revive the conversation and keep

Example transitioning techniques

There are many ways to move from one quadrant to the next (see table left); here are a few that work well. Do not try to make the transition until it feels comfortable. Some people will be happy to talk business straightaway; others will be more comfortable on social topics while they get to know you.

A to B (social chat to build rapport)

Questioning with a direction in mind: "How has your week been?", "Good weekend?" "Ask for hot words (what is important in an ideal X?) — holidays, hobbies, interests etc.

A or B, to C (general business)

How is business? What do you see as the biggest issues facing your sector/industry/business? So what do you think about interest rates/the Rover crisis etc.

C to D (get enough rapport, then look for reason for card swap)

Is that affecting you very much? So what is the effect of that? Why is that important? Etc

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talking (or introduce them to someone else). Otherwise there is nothing wrong with just excusing yourself — your time is valuable. If you are not sure if the event is worthwhile, you can always visit the cloak-room and reconsider whether to stay or do something else. And if you re-enter the event, you can then start a conversation with someone new.

5. Getting a business card

Unless you have established a good reason for needing their details (ideally to enable you to provide some value for them), exchanging cards can be awkward and is unlikely to lead anywhere. With such a reason, however, getting a card becomes easy. At first, it can help to have something pre-prepared to say. Here is a template — modify it to suit your preferences.

If you have managed to identify something specific:

"So if I understand, the issue you have got is <summarise key points arising from conversation?" (yes).

"Ok, well I think that is something we could talk about/I have contacts who might be able to help/I have an article (book) that could help. I will send it you", (thanks)

"Have you got a card?" (yes)

If you've not discovered a specific issue but the mood music is good:

"Let's keep in touch, and maybe arrange a coffee or a chat on the phone." (yes)

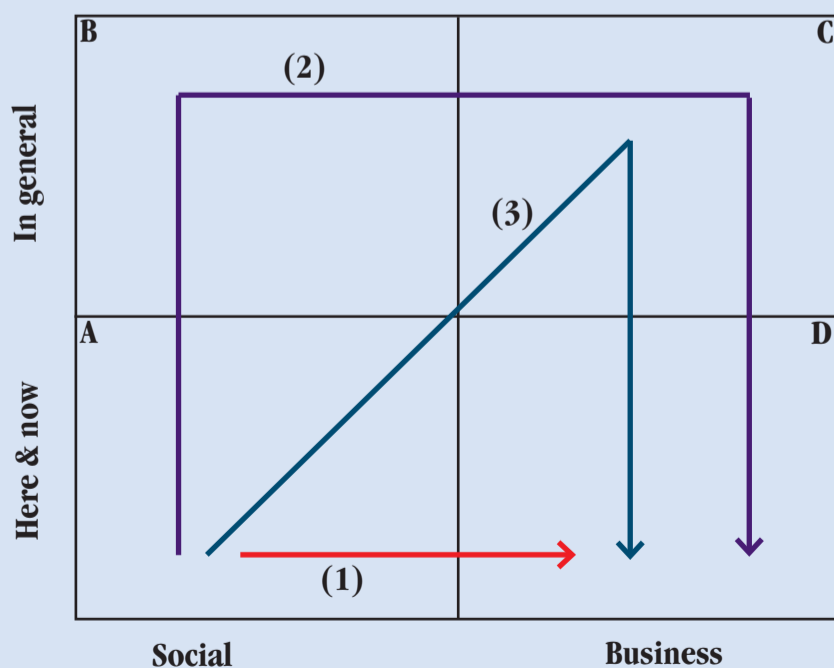
"Here is my card" (they will generally give you their card in exchange).

Once you have a business card and an agreement to do something, the follow-up should be rapid — this demonstrates to the other person that you do what you say and do so promptly.

Networking is a medium-to-long term strategy. Building relationships that are true assets takes time, but people tend to be motivated to do things which bring them welcome results quickly. The figure makes clear that activity must be initiated and sustained ahead of payback.

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A map for finding your direction



Which route?

- Route 1 — Usually too pushy
- Route 2 — A good general approach
- Route 3 — Often possible