

NETWORKING NEEDS A REBRAND

By Brandi Staley-Sladek

Network! It's the gold standard of advice given to law students and young lawyers. The key to success. The one thing you can do to set yourself apart and (if you do it right) get ahead.

Is that true? What does "networking" even mean? Do you need it? And, if networking is so important, **how do you make time when you are *tired, working late or taking care of loved ones, friends, pets and yourself?*** Or, what if you **just don't feel like it?**

My (unsolicited) advice: **Give networking a mental rebrand.** Reframe how you think about networking, cut yourself some slack, and, most importantly, use networking as an opportunity to connect with people in your community.



If you are in law school, you are reading hundreds of pages, studying and engaging in various school sanctioned activities every day in addition to living your life. Then you graduate and enter the legal profession, where you are spending more than eight hours a day learning to practice law by billing hours, heading to the courthouse and meeting clients. At the end of a long day, it's difficult to get in the right frame of mind to head to a bar association event and meet new people. Even for an extrovert, this can be daunting at best and exhausting at worst. Our time is at a premium, and in the post-covid landscape, we are all more thoughtful about how and where we spend our time.

Nevertheless, I am one more person who is here to tell you that it's important to find support and maintain involvement in your legal community. Here are a few tips and tricks to rebrand and reframe networking to make it even 1% more enjoyable.

Tips and Tricks:

- **Stop treating networking as a job.** This is the biggest reframe and maybe the hardest. Networking is a way to build community with other law students and legal professionals. We all network every single day when we make a connection with the barista at our regular coffee shop, the security guard at the courthouse or the staff at your local bar association. **Getting to know people on a human level is networking.** When you treat networking as a job, it becomes transactional. It becomes about what you can gain from a meeting instead of what you can learn or offer. When you treat networking as an opportunity to be curious about other people, it becomes more genuine, more casual and less stressful.



- **Networking is a skill.** Like most things in the legal profession, networking is a skill that you can develop and hone over the course of your career. Don't feel discouraged when it feels particularly exhausting or difficult, especially after a long day. It gets easier over time, and (at the risk of sounding cliché) practice makes perfect.



There are a few easy ways to gain comfort and confidence, and it starts with authenticity. Yes, the essence of this advice is to be yourself. When you are yourself, even if that is awkward, self-conscious or (often in my case) grumpy from hunger, it's much easier to know what settings, groups and interactions will enable you to thrive. If you feel overwhelmed in large groups, seek out small group settings where you can talk to people one-on-one. If you feel awkward, try attending an event where there is an activity, like a social or wellness event where you have something else to focus on to make you feel more comfortable. Working within your limits can allow you to become more comfortable with the idea of attending events and meeting new people. And the longer you are in practice, the more people you will meet, meaning the more faces you will recognize the next time you walk into a room.

- **Give yourself unconditional permission to say “No.”** If you are a current or recovering overachiever, it may be difficult to hear that you don't have to do or be everything, especially at the start of your career. If you want to be more involved in the legal community, you can do so and still say “no” sometimes. You do not need to join every organization. You do not need to attend every event for the organizations you join. You do not need to stay for the duration of every event you attend. Find the organizations that speak to you and provide you with the best opportunities to network on your terms. And give yourself unconditional permission to turn down opportunities you can't commit to. Success means longevity, and burnout is real.

- **Balance discipline with compassion.** At the end of the day, sometimes you need to have a little discipline. If being part of the legal community is something you want, you might have to force yourself to participate or attend an event. There have been many evenings where I would rather reunite with my couch than drive to the bar association and chat with friends and strangers after a long day. I employ a full-proof strategy that has greatly helped me on those difficult days. I tell myself that **I am required to walk through the door, and after that, I can leave whenever I want.** That could be in 5 minutes (this has happened), or 30 minutes (this has also happened), or the duration of the event (believe it or not, this has happened too). Discipline forces me to make the effort, and compassion gives me a complete and total out.



Networking is a commitment, but it's also a skill that you learn and improve with practice and time. I challenge you to give networking a rebrand so you can stop dreading it and start enjoying the time spent with friends and colleagues. Reframe networking as a meaningful opportunity to engage with your professional peers and your legal community. And know there will be times when you just don't have it in you. That's okay. The Bar will still be here for you when you are ready.



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