

10 Ways to Reciprocate in Networking

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By Stephen E. Seckler

I spend a lot of my professional time giving out advice about networking. I frequently talk to experienced lawyers about using networking as a business-development tool. Every day, I coach lawyers about using networking to uncover hidden job opportunities and interim assignments. I write articles giving practical tips to lawyers and other professionals who want to improve their networking skills.

But I also continue to be a student of the subject. In my view, it is easy to learn the basics about networking, but networking is a subtle and difficult skill to master.

While my networking skills have grown considerably over time (like most of the readers of this publication, I knew little or nothing about networking when I finished law school), there is still one tenet of good networking that continues to challenge me: finding ways to keep networking reciprocal.

In Networking 101, you learn that it is important to find ways to help the individuals who take the time to meet with you. Networking is not supposed to be a one-way flow of help from the networkee (who has contacts, leads, and information) to you, the networker. Networking should be a symbiotic activity.

While this may sound simple in theory, in practical terms finding ways to be helpful to someone you hardly know is a challenge. This is particularly true if

you happen to be in a job search. After all, you are the one who needs a job. Presumably, the people on your networking list already have jobs. You are contacting them because you want to learn more about their job, their firm, their company or their industry. You also want to know if they have any other contacts for you.

But if you really work at it, you can usually find some way to reciprocate - even when you feel that you are the one in need. By taking some initiative before, during and after a networking meeting, you can usually identify something of interest to the contact and use that knowledge to be "helpful."

Come Prepared, Be a Great Listener, and Ask Probing Questions.

Preparation is an essential part of uncovering ways to reciprocate. Before meeting a contact, find out whatever you can about the person. Where did he/she go to school? Where else has he/she worked? Learn what you can about his/her company. Has it issued any major press releases in the past six months?

If the company is public, you should be able to get a lot of information from the Internet. But many private companies also provide ample information on company websites.

Check major national, regional, and local periodicals to see if there has been any information about the company or individual in the past year. In addition to googling the person and his/her firm, you might benefit from a trip to your local library. Not everything is online.

If you were given the name of the contact by someone else, find out what he/she knows about the person (accomplishments, personal interests, personality, family status, age, where they live, where they grew up, etc.) and how he/she knows him/her.

Once you are at a networking meeting, you want to demonstrate great listening skills. Come with the mindset that you intend to be helpful to the individual (i.e., in addition to coming to the meeting hoping to receive some help). This will greatly color the questions that you ask.

Ask a lot of open-ended questions about his/her work, his/her achievements, the company, and what he/she would like to improve at the firm. Find out if there is anything he/she is doing to further his/her own professional development. Ask him/her directly how you can be of help.

If you feel comfortable, ask about his/her family. Does he/she have kids? How old are they, and what are they interested in? What does his/her spouse do?

If you meet in their office, look around for signs of any hobbies he/she may have. Ask him/her if he/she really skied the beautiful mountain in the photograph on the wall. Talk about sports or golf if these subjects are of interest to you. Inquire about any volunteer work he/she might do or nonprofit causes that are important to him/her.

If the focus of your meeting is gathering information about the other individual, you are bound to identify something you can do for him/her. While it is impossible to script this out beforehand, below are some examples to get you thinking about the kinds of things that you can do for the other person.

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What you end up doing for the other individual depends almost entirely on what comes up during your meeting. Whether or not you are helpful is in the eyes of the recipient, and no checklist can help you determine in advance what might be considered helpful to a particular individual.

Nonetheless, it is useful to think of general categories of helping as you probe for ideas. The following list is only intended to stimulate your own creativity. You will have to decide what is appropriate.

1. Buy them lunch. *Commentary: Nowadays, it is more difficult to get someone out of his/her office for lunch. But if you do manage to set up a lunch meeting, make sure to grab the check when it comes. Even if you are unemployed and worrying about money, offering to pay is the proper etiquette and an easy way to immediately reciprocate for the individual's time.*

2. Flatter them. *Commentary: While this may seem like a superficial way to help an individual, the truth is that most of us like to be appreciated. As long as the appreciation is sincere, flattery is actually a mild form of helping another professional.*

3. Send them an article. *Commentary: If you listen carefully to the contact and find out what you can about their professional, volunteer, and personal interests, you will increase the likelihood that you will identify an article you can send them after the meeting. This, of course, requires that you be an avid reader of professional and trade journals and general-interest periodicals. Online*

content has made forwarding articles easier in some instances (as long as you have the individual's email address).

4. Introduce them to a service provider that you have used. *Commentary: The service provider can be a personal service provider (e.g., a great carpenter or plumber) or a professional service provider (e.g., a therapist they can refer their difficult clients to).*

5. Offer to be helpful to their family or subordinates. *Commentary: If you are much younger than the contact, it may be difficult to find some way to be helpful to the person directly. But maybe you can be helpful to their children or their associates. Is their son applying to your undergraduate college? Maybe the son would like to speak with you. Does the contact have an employee who needs help with time management (something you are good at)? Offer to meet their employee.*

6. Provide health information. *Commentary: While this is a more sensitive area of inquiry, if the contact mentions a health problem he is dealing with and you have a lot of experience with this health problem, offer to be a resource. For example, if the contact has back problems and you have tried a lot of alternative remedies, offer to share your experience.*

7. Demonstrate genuine interest in getting involved in a nonprofit cause of theirs. *Commentary: Are you interested in a nonprofit cause that is of interest to the contact? Ask if there is any way you can support the cause through volunteer activity.*

8. Teach them something about technology. *Commentary: If you entered the*

workforce after 1985 and the other individual is on the other side of the digital divide, maybe you can help them to understand something about the Internet, email, or computers in general.

9. Introduce them to someone who could be a source of business for them.
Commentary: Find out if there are any categories of individuals that they are trying to meet. Perhaps you have a friend or relative who can be a business lead for them.

10. Answer a question they have or offer to get the answer for them.
Commentary: If the individual is not an attorney, you may be able to answer a legal question they have (or get the answer from one of your colleagues). While you have to be careful about your ethical responsibilities as a lawyer (as well as any policies that your firm may have in place about this), providing free legal advice is a great way to reciprocate and build goodwill.

Networking is a subtle art because it is all about building relationships. In some cases, it is not possible to build a relationship because the other individual is not interested. But if you keep the word "reciprocal" on your mind, you will begin to discover that there are more ways for you to be helpful than you realized.

The key is to keep asking probing questions and show a sincere interest in the other individual. If you do, your networks will become stronger, and you will not have to work as hard to build them.