

## **REPRINTED FROM THE RECORDER**

Friday, July 9, 1993

### **SECRETS OF WORKING A ROOM**

**By Robert N. Kohn**

In the process of marketing, lawyers from time to time will inevitably find themselves at a social function where they must “Work the room.” While this can be an extremely effective way of developing clients and referral sources, many lawyers find these situations to be distasteful. There are many obstacles to working a room, but these can be overcome through specific techniques that can minimize the unpleasantness and maximize the effectiveness of the experience.

- Clarify your goals.

One of the reasons lawyers find working a room distasteful is that they often do not have a clear understanding of their objectives. They make the mistake of assuming that their goal is to sell. However, it is unrealistic to think that you could meet someone for the first time at an event and convince them to hire you on the spot. Potential prospects you meet may not have an immediate need for your services, or they may already have a relationship with another lawyer.

There are two goals to have in working a room; 1) meet quality contacts and think of these contacts as the beginning of relationships that may not consummate for years; and 2) to further your relationships with existing contacts.

- Target who you want to meet.

Another obstacle to working a room is that lawyers often go to events without considering who else will be attending. Consider the lawyers who have made the mistake of attending an event that they did not adequately research. After a few hours of working the room, they walk away with a bunch of business cards from business people who vary from “dress for success” consultants to herbal, hypno-massage therapists.

Similarly, they’ll attend a bar function and end up meeting their competition. These experiences often reinforce their belief that working a room is a waste of their time and discourage them from trying again.

The way to overcome this obstacle is by targeting and knowing in advance precisely who you want to meet. Imagine if you were to invest the same time and effort in a room full of quality prospects and referral sources. For example, if you were a patent lawyer and found yourself in a room full of well-to-do inventors, it would be an extremely rewarding experience, even if you met only a small percentage of individuals.

In order to target effectively, begin by asking your clients and referral sources what organizations they belong to. They may even agree to bring you to one of their functions and introduce you to their colleagues. As you meet people, continue to ask them what other organizations they support. You will find that in a relatively short period of time you will learn about a vast array of charitable, civic, community, religious, business, trade and professional

groups that will provide a fertile supply of prospects and referral sources for you to meet.

- How to meet people:

When you go to an event and find yourself in a sea of strangers, here are some tips to make the process of meeting people easier. First, arrive early. You will find that it is easier to make acquaintances when the room is relatively empty. It is much more difficult to meet people after they have already formed small groups. Furthermore, if you arrive late, you may miss valuable marketing opportunities.

Upon arrival, introduce yourself to the organization's staff. They will know many of the members of the organization and will be glad to introduce you to appropriate targets.

Another tip for meeting people is to go with a friend. Going with someone can ease the pressure of being alone in a room full of strangers. You can work as a team to meet people. But avoid the temptation of sticking together. Make a pact before you enter to part company. If the function is for a meal, avoid sitting at the same table. Your goal is to meet others, not socialize with your teammate.

- Stimulate meaningful conversation.

Meeting people is only an initial step. Your next objective is to develop rapport. This requires engaging people in conversation.

A significant obstacle in working a room is that lawyers often feel frustrated with the superficial nature of the conversations. One solution to this problem is to talk about issues that are important to you. Consider discussing four or five major interests or recent meaningful experiences in your life. If possible, discuss situations in which you recently helped a client or an associate accomplish some significant goal. People will be far more impressed by your ability to freely reveal important facts about yourself, than your ability to discuss the weather.

Another technique that will stimulate conversation is to prepare your dialogue in advance. You wouldn't consider going into trial without preparing. So, don't go into a marketing environment without thinking about what you are going to say to potential prospects and referral sources.

One of your goals in working a room is to learn about the people you are meeting so that you can determine whether or not they are someone with whom you want to pursue a relationship. Therefore, you should be equipped with an arsenal of questions that reveal issues that are important to you.

What needs do they have? What are their interests? It's no secret that people love to talk about themselves. If you can provide an opportunity for someone to discuss their needs and interests, not only will they appreciate you, but you will eliminate the burden of having to be witty and clever.

- Go for volume.

Keep in mind that as you begin to meet and interact with people, you may be lulled into the risk of getting comfortable with one or two friendly individuals. Be careful not to limit yourself. Rather, go for volume and sow as many seeds as possible. The more contacts you make now, brief as they may be, the more potential relationships you may pursue in the future.

- Follow-up.

Once you've met someone who you have identified as a quality prospect, make sure that you ask for their business card and follow up. It's recommended that you make a commitment as you engage in conversation to implement some future activity. Too often, lawyers ask for a business card with the intention of following up, but never follow through. Making a commitment, such as promising to mail something or call to schedule a meeting, forces you to take action. If you do follow through, it demonstrates to your prospect that you are someone who fulfills promises by keeping commitments.

Finally, after you leave the event, take a moment and review the cards you've collected. Write whatever you can remember about each good contact and make sure that they get added to your mailing list. Remember, your goal is to build relationships. Not putting a prospect on your mailing list for follow-up renders the effort of meeting people virtually meaningless.

Working a room can be an important part of your marketing effort. Effectively implemented, it's a way to meet new people and build closer relationships with existing contacts. And while it may at first appear to be an unpleasant experience, with some practice, many attorneys actually find it fun as well as financially rewarding.