



Working the room

Executive coaches **Karen B. Kahn** and **Andi Groomes**, of Threshold Advisors, describe their networking methodology: *Engage the Room YOUR Way™*.

Lawyers are frequently inundated with invitations to seminars, conferences, charity events and family/personal gatherings. Reactions to these, dare we say ‘opportunities’, vary, based on personality, comfort level and time constraints. Reactions we hear from our clients run the gamut from; “I hate these things, it’s sheer torture...” to “It’s tolerable, but seems like a waste of time ...” to “I like to meet new people, but I have enough friends, what I need is more new business prospects!” No matter where you land on the spectrum, however, there is an opportunity to maximise the value of these events and leverage your attendance when you know how to “Engage the Room YOUR Way™”.

Below is a four-step process for optimising your attendance at events. These actions lead to developing and expanding valuable personal and professional relationships on any given occasion. It is important to emphasise that ‘engaging’ has less to do with being a good conversationalist and more to do with listening to others’ needs. By highlighting ‘your’ way we are emphasising the notion that each person has his or her own way of effectively and comfortably connecting with others. By using your unique style of talking to others, respecting your comfort zone for forging acquaintances, and setting your personal objectives for attending, you will feel less anxious on the one hand, and more able to meet new and interesting people, maybe even future clients and great colleagues!

Step one: Preparation

Most of us attend events hoping that something valuable and wonderful will serendipitously happen. Thoughtful preparation increases the likelihood of valuable outcomes.

First, define your goals. Think expansively and consider multiple objectives. For example, the primary purpose of attending a CLE event is to obtain licensure credit, but there are many more valuable opportunities in the room. This is the case in all events. Set several goals that include information, resources, introductions, potential business, and enjoyment, and then ask yourself which individuals at the event could help you reach your goals? Consider the presenters; who you might want to invite to go with you, and who else you think tends to attend the particular type of event. The answers to these and similar questions form your strategy.

Next, imagine the content of conversations that would lead to your goals and think through ways to initiate such conversations. Think particularly about questions that will enable you to get to know an individual, expose their needs, and which may lead to a continuing connection.

Prepare a compelling retort to the question “What do you do?” A factual answer such as “I am a labor and employment lawyer” usually does not engage the asker. Instead, consider responding as if the question was either “What do you love about what you do?” or “How do you help your clients?” These may lead to a more substantial and interesting dialogue.

Experiment with these basic steps to preparation for your next event:

- Create specific objectives or outcomes;
- Devise a strategy comprised of who you would like to meet;
- Construct a compelling introduction about what you do.

Step two: Execution

Your goals for engaging the room your way involve initiating and expanding valuable relationships. The key for fostering strong connections lies in listening for, and talking about, the other person’s needs. This type of ‘focused’ listening opens conversations, and positions you for an important and lasting role in the other person’s life.

Listening is a very active endeavour, as it requires that we intensely hear the content of what is being said. Powerful listening also requires us to ask questions that propel the conversation forward in deep and meaningful ways. At law school you learned about ‘issue spotting’; effective listening for needs involves similar skills, but at events those ‘issues’ are the other person’s needs, opportunities and/or challenges. Ask for information (the who, what, where and how about what the person is saying) and reflect emotions (‘that sounds difficult!’ for example). Ask questions that uncover unspoken concerns you sense, resources they need to reach their goals

and information about their interests. Use the acronym FORD when searching for categories of conversation topics; it stands for family, occupation, recreation and dreams. These vehicles will often bring you to the point of being able to offer personal or professional assistance.

At the end of a conversation, then go on to make a transition or ‘bridge’ to a next conversation. A ‘bridge’ is your mechanism for follow up. It can be a question (“how did the race you told me about go?”), a response to a need (“here is an article about the issue we spoke about.”) or an offer to get together again (“I enjoyed talking briefly at the charity dinner and would enjoy continuing our discussion over coffee.”) Bridges build relationships. Without them, you risk having a collection of business cards containing names of people you will barely remember.

Experiment with these basic activities when conversing at your next event:

- Ask questions to discover needs;
- Listen particularly for challenges, concerns and opportunities;
- Explore topics related to family, occupation, recreation and dreams;
- Be aware of a ‘bridge’ to enable the next conversation.



Debriefing is most effective when written down. Many successful rainmakers have a journal, paper or online, only for this function; it allows them to review important occasions, track the development of relationships, and store critical information.

Step three: Debrief

Debriefing sets the stage for a strong return on your (and the firm’s) investment of time and resources. By immediately documenting a review of the event, you capture the details of the experience, record the information about people you met, evaluate what you learned, and gather any lessons or insights. This allows you to create a follow-up strategy to obtain the many benefits of attending the event. The moment you place an event in your calendar you should also schedule a specific, 15-minute block of time to debrief the event. It is easy to be tempted to skip debriefing, but without it you risk forgetting important details about conversations and may even forget the event entirely.

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for this function. This tool allows them to review important occasions, track the development of relationships, and store critical information about individuals. Use FORD to organise what you learn about people. Attend to issues such as:

- Who are all of the individuals that I met?
- What did I learn about each person?
- What are the challenges and opportunities facing each person?
- What value can I provide to each individual?

It is also important to debrief your own skills by asking what you did that was effective in making connections and what you would like to do differently the next time you are at an event. Just as athletes evaluate themselves in order to develop their skills, so must you. The better you become at engaging people in connective conversations, hearing their needs and becoming valuable parts of their network, the stronger your career trajectory will be.

Finally, list activities that will take the event conversations forward. Schedule time for each action.

Step four: Follow up

Now is the time for the final step of the process. The purpose of follow-up is to sustain the relationship you began at the event by creating the next connection. The ‘bridges’ discussed in the execution section is important for relevant follow-up. Connecting follow-up communication to the previous conversation keeps the relationship-building process fresh. Many lawyers with whom we work send ‘it was good to meet you’ notes after an event. However, unless a ‘bridge’ is included in the content the relationship will not move forwards.

If you find yourself stymied about how to follow up, possibly because the conversation during the event was very brief or was within the context of a large group, meaningful follow-up is still possible and important. Think about what you know about the individual or take a few moments to research the individual. Make a next connection by sending or offering something that he or she may need. Consider resources, information and introductions. Asking a question that you wish you could have asked (or thought to ask) is also a fine next step, and one that could launch a future conversation.

Also, institute tools and structures to help you insure that follow-up is timely and complete and that you continue to develop each relationship. For example: calendar time for follow-up (it shouldn’t take more than five minutes per person). Ask your assistant to remind you to contact each person at a given date in the future, such as quarterly, and have a designated file in your computer or a paper binder to store information about people with whom you connect.

The act of following up determines the value to be gained from attending an event. Experiment with the following activities to leverage the investment you make in attending events of any kind:

- Schedule time for follow-up activities;
- Reconnect with individuals by sending something they need;
- Have a system that tracks the development of your relationships and gives you periodic reminders to stay in touch;
- Learning the process of engaging others your way is exactly that; something that you can learn and become skilled at generating.

The four elements described above are a structure for developing important relationships, and when deployed consistently, they can be a major key to personal and professional success. [WOMENLEGAL](#)

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Andi Groomes is a collaborant with Threshold Advisors. The concepts contained in this article and program, Engaging the Room YOUR Way™, were created by KM Advisors, LLC