How to Network With Reporters and Potential Referral Sources at an Industry Conference

By Janet Falk

Following the maxim of "Fish where the fish are," you've registered for a conference sponsored by an industry group in a market sector where you would like to garner more clients.

Here is how to effectively network with the reporters who will be serving as moderators at the event, as well as the panelists and leaders of the industry membership organization sponsoring the programs.

PLAN AHEAD

Read the conference program a week before the opening date. Identify the reporters who will be moderating the panels and look up their five latest articles on their respective publications' websites. Review these news stories and make note of how they relate to your clients and the transactions you've closed or the matters you've successfully resolved. Be sure to flag anything else from these articles that catches your eye.

TAKE ACTION

Next, write an introductory email to each reporter with the subject line: "Looking forward to a great panel on September 3."

YOUR MESSAGE

Mention that you have read their news stories because you advise clients in a related business, along these lines:

> Leslie,
>
> Your name came to my attention as the moderator of the NAME OF PANEL at the NAME OF EVENT.
>
> I am an attorney with a practice focused on ____.
>
> The panel topic particularly interests me because ___.
>
> Your recent articles on ___ raise some interesting points about the challenges that my clients in the __ sector currently face, which will doubtless be part of the discussion. I look forward to an insight-filled session.
>
> Perhaps after the panel we can chat over coffee.
>
> Regards,
>
> Your Name
>
> Law firm website

YOUR STRATEGY

By contacting the reporter in advance, you separate yourself from the attendees who will crowd around the panelists' table at the end of the session. Showing some interest and familiarity with the reporter's work differentiates you even more. The reporter may well be intrigued and write back to you. If you do not receive a reply, consider that deadline pressures and the need to complete news stories prior to spending time out of the office at the event have taken their toll on any expected response.

EXTEND YOUR NET FURTHER

Now that you are in the swim of reaching out to the reporter-moderators, it's appropriate to extend your net further.

Contact the panelists themselves with a variation on the email you sent to the reporters. Express your interest in learning how they see the state of the industry, especially so that you can be more helpful to your colleagues and clients. Indicate you'd like to speak with them after the panel.

Connect with the Officers and Committee Chairs of the sponsoring organization. If you are not already a member of the group, let them know you will be attending the event and are considering membership. Here's a variation on the reporter/panelist email:

> Sidney,
>
> Your name came to my attention as an officer/committee chair of the [Host Organization.]
>
> I am an attorney with a practice in____.
>
> Recently, I advised [Relevant Company] on various projects in [Specific Area of Mutual Interest]. I wish to learn more about the [Host Organization] and how, if I become a member, I might get involved in your activities.
>
> Perhaps we can chat during the networking session at the Conference, where I'm excited to meet you and your colleagues.
>
> Regards,
>
> Your Name
>
> Law firm website

The leaders of the organization will be thrilled to get your note. Perhaps half of them will reply with a warm welcome. Why? Every professional group strives to bring in new members, especially people who offer in-the-trenches knowledge, like law, to share with their current members. Your email inspires confidence that you are a professional who belongs in the group. It establishes common ground on which you will build a mutually beneficial relationship.

Now you will reply warmly to them. In your note, mention that you will wear an article of clothing that will make it easy for you both to spot each other in the crowded room where the networking session takes place. Perhaps a woman wears a red jacket and a man wears a green tie. Through this email exchange, you will build a Welcoming Committee and the officers will seek you out at the networking session.

AT THE CONFERENCE

Arrive early to the panel session, so you can introduce yourself to the reporter acting as moderator, plus the speakers. They are expecting

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to see you, after all. Remind them of your previous email correspondence and exchange cards. Try to set a time to talk in the course of the conference or for a future date; follow-up on that plan.

As for the networking session, set aside a few minutes to review the names and LinkedIn profiles of the people you contacted. Take notes on any areas of mutual interest, to deepen the conversation. This annotated list of names is your game plan.

When you arrive, ask the person at the registration desk to point out one or two of the officers or committee chairs on your list. Be on the lookout for these contacts. When you speak with them, ask about the organization itself or trends in the industry. Learn why they became a member and what they most enjoy about the group. Find out how they contributed to its success. Let them promote the organization and recruit you. Only discuss yourself and your legal services in passing. As the conversation freely progresses, and you collect their business cards, take out your list and ask to meet some of the others you contacted.

This introduction will enhance the status of your new contact in the other officer's eyes. Imagine the group's president thinking, "That Martha, she's on the ball, bringing in new members!" Check the names on your list and endeavor to meet as many of the officers and committee chairs as possible.

As time permits, ask your new contacts to introduce you to others they think might be good connections for you.

After the Event

Back in the office, send a follow-up email and a personalized LinkedIn connection request to EVERYONE you met. Note what a pleasure it was to speak in person after your email exchange.

For the reporters, suggest a hot issue or two that might be of interest to readers in the industry. Perhaps you have written a relevant article, blog post or client alert to share with the journalist.

For the panelists, congratulate them on their insightful presentation and mention something you learned from the discussion. Suggest a reason to meet or speak on the phone and plan to stay in touch.

For the organization's officers and committee chairs, write how much you enjoyed learning more about the group. If you have become a member, tell them they persuaded you to join. Finally, say that you look forward to seeing them at upcoming events.

Was there anyone on the list whom you did not meet, because they were talking with others or did not attend? Write to them again and invite them to a one-on-one coffee chat or phone call.

With this pre-conference outreach and post-conference follow-up, you get on the radar screen of the reporters, panelists and the movers and shakers of the organization. You demonstrate your interests align with theirs. Thanks to that common ground, you enhance your connecting and networking success at the conference and in your follow-up.

Finally, treat these new connections as potential referral sources to prospective clients. Of course, you don't expect to immediately land any business at the conference. Going forward, cultivating a relationship with the reporters, plus leveraging an introduction by a panelist, officer or committee chair, will contribute to your progress on the path to getting the media coverage and the referrals you seek.

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Vendors

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vendors what they need to generate more wins, find ways they can more fully leverage available resources, bring them onsite whenever possible, invite them to occasional staff meetings, etc. Remember, success is not an accident.

Strategic Meetings

Anyone who has ever worked with me knows I am not a proponent of holding meetings just for the sake of gathering. In fact, I used to bring to staff meetings a little statue of Agendus — the god of short meetings — to remind team members to keep things moving. When used correctly, meetings can serve a valuable role, especially when working with vendors. Regularly scheduled meetings with defined agendas work well. Such an approach will help minimize the back-and-forth of emails, keep the team focused on results-oriented activities and ensure that team members have a consistent forum in which to discuss and strategize project- and team-related matters, as well as to adjust or realign expectations. A caveat to this guidance is that not every project requires such meetings. Frequently, the nature of the vendor-driven work is such that progress can be monitored simply via email, occasional conference calls or formal online reporting. Determine what works best for you.

Manage Communications

We live in a time of information overload. It comes at us in all forms and from all directions. Getting ahead of it is virtually impossible and keeping up with it is not necessarily cause for celebration. In the words of legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, "Don't mistake activity with achievement." When managing marketing vendors (often in addition to internal teams), information or communication overload can consume precious time, deplete available resources and perhaps even grind projects to a halt.

Using project management tools is an effective way to communicate with your marketing vendor or vendors, as well as anyone else involved in a specific project. I have used or tested a number of such tools, often at the suggestion of a particular vendor of record. With scalable

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