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Relationship Building Continuing the Connection

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You need to develop relationships to build up your law practice. It's not enough, however, to simply have a first meeting. To ensure that the relationships—and your business—thrive, you must also follow through with your contacts. Here are three basic rules for effective follow-through.

1. ALWAYS SET NEXT STEPS

"Next steps" are the actions required to complete a task. In relationship building, they involve deciding who will do what and when. The purpose is to keep the relationship moving forward. Usually, the easiest way to set next steps is to ask the other person to set them with you. Simply find out how the other person would like to proceed. Or, propose a next step and ask whether the other person agrees, or what alternative would work better for her or him. Here are simple ideas for setting next steps.

- Set up the next telephone or in-person meeting.
- Discuss how often and by what means to be in touch.
- Agree to send each other material or information.
- Agree to make specific introductions to appropriate others.
- Set time frames for follow-through.
- Explore further next steps together.

2. ALWAYS DO WHAT WAS AGREED

To continue a relationship, it is imperative to do what you agreed to do. When you keep your word, the contact has hard evidence that you take the relationship seriously. You establish and enhance trust and credibility. Here are ways to further your goals.

- Send a letter or e-mail confirming the agreed-on next steps.
- Do what you promised to do, within the agreed-on time frame.
- If necessary, remind the other person—in a gentle manner—of his obligations. Tell him that you are looking forward to hearing from him.

The follow-through will differ depending on whether you are networking or developing a client. When networking, you should try to add value to your contact's business and help the contact to add value to your business. Follow-through with a prospective client requires that you stay in touch and keep the process moving—but without pushing too hard.

With networking contacts:

- Find something to add value to the relationship quickly, such as a client or referral source that you can give to the networking partner. Do this within a week of your meeting, if possible.
- Properly introduce your networking partner to the client or referral source. Let both know the potential value each has for the other. Give each the information they need to follow up with each other.
- Explore and determine how you and your networking partner can further develop your relationship.
- Agree on regular intervals to maintain contact.

With potential clients:

- Follow up when promised, and begin the conversation by saying something like, "I am calling to follow up with you as you suggested (or as we agreed). Is this a good time to check in?" By reminding the prospective client that she agreed to the follow-up, you eliminate the risk of seeming like a cold caller.
- If the prospective client does not have time to speak when called, ask when you should follow up again.
- If the connection does happen but the prospect isn't ready to provide new work, ask when you should make the next follow-up call.

3. TAKE CHARGE IF NO ONE SET NEXT STEPS

No one is perfect. Professionals often put off follow-up communication for a variety of reasons—too busy, not comfortable or forgot why the follow-up was to be done. Whatever the reason, follow through as soon as possible—and be honest about the delay. Try these suggestions.

With networking contacts:

- "I'm sorry that it took so long to get in touch with you. Do you still think it makes sense to talk now?" (If the person said he was going to call first, say, "You must be very busy too, because I did not hear from you.")
- "I wanted to call you many times, but I unfortunately haven't had the time. I still think there is potential value in getting together. Will you have any time in the next couple of weeks?"
- "I didn't want to call you until I knew that I would have time to meet. Are you still interested in following up?"

With potential clients:

- "I wanted to follow up with you but didn't want to seem pushy. It sounded like you were interested in our working together on some matters. Does it still make sense for us to talk?"
- "I haven't heard from you since we met, and I thought you had a situation you wanted to discuss. Could you still use some input?"
- "I really enjoyed speaking with you when we met some time ago, and I wanted to follow up and see how you are doing now. Do you have a few minutes?"

The bottom line is that there is rarely anything to lose and potentially much to gain by making a belated follow-up call or even e-mail to reopen communications. The key is to keep the connections continuing.

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