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## How and When To Seek Business From Your Social Circle

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*Your social circles are often rich with prospects and referrals, yet approaching friends for their legal work can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Indeed, asking for business in social situations has both risks and rewards.*

*The most obvious risk is the potential to damage friendships that are important to you. Conversely, the rewards can include longstanding, mutually beneficial social and professional relationships. Therefore, you want to carefully weigh the potential outcomes of asking for business from those with whom you socialize before you decide to do so.*

You likely have a number of friends with whom you spend time socially. In addition to those friends, you also have individuals in your life who are social connections, relationships you create with prominent people you already see or will see in social settings but who are not necessarily close friends. For instance, the parents of your children's teammates on their soccer team whom you chat with at games would be considered social connections.

### **Tapping casual acquaintances**

Social connections can be important prospects to consider asking for business. Imagine this scenario: Your children attend school with the children of some high-profile prospects. You have nodded in passing or talked to these prospects, knowing

that you will most likely be seeing them again. When thinking about how best to approach these prospects, consider that your method should be similar to what you would do before meeting any other prospect. Overall, the goal is to build a relationship. To that end, research those you want to approach in advance with an eye toward identifying what is on the "other side of the business card." Refer to online sources and work your networks.

When approaching these prospective clients, ask yourself where you can create commonality. How can you initiate a conversation beyond what people ordinarily discuss with these individuals? For example, you and a social connection may both collect art, or the two of you share a strong interest in



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that area. Perhaps you are both triathletes, or the prospect has a house in Montana, an area you will be visiting soon. Once you are aware of a connection, use it as the foundation to build a relationship. Ask if you can put him on the list for artist talks, triathlete coaching meet-ups, or some other groups that represent your shared interests. Follow him on social media and comment on what he has to say. Think about what you can offer with no expectation of a return. For instance, you can volunteer to work for a cause that is important to him.

Once you believe you are on a footing to ask the prospect about their legal work, be prepared to say exactly what you want. It may be that you would like to get together in a different setting or have his permission to use his name when approaching his corporate counsel. Whatever your request is, be sure to make it very specific and succinct. For instance, saying, "I understand you're facing environmental issues in this district. We have successfully represented clients with this same challenge before the same decision-makers. I don't want to be pushy, but may I turn the conversation >>

## How and When to Seek Business From Your Social Circle (continued)

to business for a quick moment?"

If the person seems open, then make your request. If you ask and feel any awkwardness or pushback, then gently disengage and refrain from broaching the topic again.

### A friend in need ...

Another group of people to approach are your actual friends, individuals with whom you already have solid bonds and friendly relationships. When approaching a real friend, acknowledge the friendship and the notion that you want to steer the conversation toward business. In this way, you can get permission to move in this direction. One way to raise the subject is by saying something such as, "I know your firm does a lot of work in my specialty and uses many lawyers in the process. Since my firm has extensive experience in that area, what are the possibilities of being considered for some of that work or being introduced to the right person?" If your friend says they do not like conducting business with friends, say you understand and respect that, and appreciate listening to your request. From that point, be prepared to segue into a different subject.

Timing is everything, so be certain the moment is right. Do not interrupt other conversations a friend or social connection

might be having. Additionally, trust your intuition. If you feel this specific person will find your asking about business offensive, you should consider this. However, you need to evaluate how much of this feeling comes from your own reticence. Again, if you ask and feel any discomfort or rejection when reaching out to friends or social connections, be prepared with another subject you can segue to and avoid talking about it further.

There are different philosophies regarding whether or not to ask friends and social connections for business. Some professionals separate their social lives from their work, deciding before participating in an event or other engagement if it is business or purely social. Others believe that if it is all about whom you know, then you should try to capitalize on relationships you already have, especially if you think they will be mutually beneficial.

No matter your perspective, when asking for business in social situations, you take a risk that the person you ask may be displeased. On the other hand, that individual could understand where you are coming from and be greatly beneficial in opening doors. By trusting your instincts and being prepared to address any outcome, you can make informed decisions that have the potential to enhance your professional life. ■