

11 Ways to Reciprocate in Networking

By **Stephen Seckler**, (www.seckler.com)

President, Seckler Legal Recruiting and Coaching, Newton, MA

I spend a lot of my time giving out advice about networking. I frequently talk to experienced lawyers about using it as a business development tool. Every day, I coach lawyers about ways to use networking to uncover hidden job opportunities and interim assignments. I write articles giving practical tips to lawyers and other professionals who want to improve their networking skills.

I also continue to be a student of the subject. In my view, it is easy to learn the basics about networking; but networking is a subtle and difficult skill to master. While my networking skills have grown considerably over time (like most of the attorneys, I knew little or nothing about networking when I finished law school), there is still one tenet of good networking that continues to challenge me: finding ways to keep networking reciprocal.

In "Networking 101," you learn that it is important to find ways to help the individuals who take the time to meet with you. Networking is not supposed to be a one-way flow of help from the networkee (who has contacts, leads and information) to you, the networker. Networking should be a symbiotic activity.

While this may sound simple in theory, in practical terms finding ways to be helpful to someone you hardly know is a challenge. This is particularly true if you happen to be in a job search. After all, you are the one who needs a job. Presumably, the people on your networking list already have jobs. You are contacting them because you want to learn more about their job, their firm, their company or their industry. You also want to know if they have any other contacts for you.

But if you really work at it, you can usually find some way to reciprocate — even when you feel that you are the one in need. By taking some initiative before, during and after a networking meeting, you can usually identify something of interest to the contact and use that knowledge to be "helpful."

Come Prepared and Be A Great Listener; Ask Probing Questions

Preparation is an essential part of uncovering ways to reciprocate. Before meeting a contact, find out whatever you can about the person. Where did they go to school? Where are they from? Where else have they worked? Learn what you can about their company. Read press releases on their company website. Google the company and the individual. Check individual LinkedIn profiles.

If someone gives you the name of a contact, find out what they know about the person (accomplishments, personal interests, personality, family status, age, where they live, where they grew up, etc.) and how they know them.

Once you are at a networking meeting, you want to demonstrate great listening skills. Come with the mindset that you intend to be helpful to the individual (i.e., in addition to coming to the meeting hoping to receive some help.) This will greatly color the questions that you ask.

Ask a lot of open-ended questions about their work, their achievements, their company and what they would like to improve at their firm. Ask them directly how you can be of help to them.

If you feel comfortable and if they mention anything about children or a spouse, ask them about their family. How old are they and what are their interests? What does their spouse do?

If you meet in their office, look around for signs of any hobbies they may have. Ask them if they really skied the beautiful mountain in the photograph on the wall. Talk about sports or golf if these subjects are of interest to you. Inquire about any volunteer work they might do or non-profit causes that are important to them.

If the focus of your meeting is gathering information about the other individual, you are bound to identify something you can do for them. While it is impossible to script this out beforehand, below are some examples to get you thinking about the kinds of things that you can do for the other person.

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What you end up doing for the other individual depends almost entirely on what comes up during your meeting. "Helpful" is in the eyes of the recipient and no checklist can help you determine in advance what might be considered helpful to a particular individual.

Nonetheless, it is useful to think of general categories of "helping" as you probe for ideas. The following list is only intended to stimulate your own creativity. You will have to decide what is appropriate.

1. Buy them lunch or coffee. Commentary: Nowadays, it is harder to get someone out of the office for lunch. Coffee is easier and quicker. But if you do manage to set up a lunch meeting, make sure to grab the check when it comes. Even if you are unemployed and worrying about money, offering to pay is the proper etiquette and an easy way to immediately reciprocate for the individual's time.
2. Flatter them. Commentary: While this may seem like a superficial way to "help" an individual, the truth is that most of us like to be appreciated. As long as the appreciation is sincere, flattery is actually a mild form of "helping" another professional.
3. Send them an article or a link to a podcast. Commentary: If you listen carefully to the contact and find out what you can about their professional, volunteer and personal interests, you will increase the likelihood that you will identify an article you can send them after the meeting. When you read professional and trade journals or general interest periodicals, look for things that might be of interest to people in your network. Online content makes it very easy to forward articles.
4. Introduce them to a service provider that you have used. Commentary: The service provider can be a personal service provider (e.g., a great carpenter or plumber) or a professional service provider (e.g., a therapist they can refer their difficult client to).

5. Offer to be helpful to their family or subordinates. Commentary: If you are much younger than the contact, it may be hard to find some way to be helpful to the person directly. But maybe you can be helpful to their children or their associates. Is their son applying to your college? Maybe the son would like to speak with you. Does the contact have an employee who needs help with time management (something you are good at)? Offer to meet their employee.

6. Provide health information. Commentary: While this is a more sensitive area of inquiry, if the contact mentions a health problem he is dealing with and you have a lot of experience with this health problem, offer to be a resource. For example, if the contact has back problems and you have tried a lot of alternative remedies, offer to share your experience.

7. Demonstrate genuine interest in getting involved in a non-profit cause of theirs. Commentary: Are you interested in a non-profit cause that is of interest to the contact? Ask if there is any way you can support the cause through volunteer activity.

8. Teach them something about technology. Commentary: If you entered the workforce after 1985 and the other individual is on the other side of the digital divide, maybe you can help them to understand something about the Internet, e-mail or computers in general.

9. Introduce them to someone who could be a source of business for them. Commentary: Find out if there are any categories of individuals that they are trying to meet. Perhaps you have a friend or relative who can be a business lead for them.

10. Answer a question they have or offer to get the answer for them. Commentary: If the individual is not an attorney, you may be able to answer a legal question they have (or get the answer from one of your colleagues). While you have to be careful about your ethical responsibilities as a lawyer (as well as any policies that your firm may have in place about this), providing free legal advice is a great way to reciprocate and build good will.

11. Recommend a movie, book or restaurant you like.

Networking is a subtle art because it is all about relationship building. In some cases, it is not possible to build a relationship because the other individual is not interested. But if you keep the word "reciprocal" in the forefront of your mind, you will begin to discover that there are more ways for you to be helpful than you realized.

The key is to keep asking probing questions and show a sincere interest in the other individual. If you do, your networks will become stronger and you will not have to work as hard to build them.



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Stephen E. Seckler, President

www.seckler.com • legal@seckler.com • 617.244.3234

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