

Prepare to be Successful: a Short Guide to Coaching Students on How to Maximize Results at Networking Events

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Encouraging students to network is one of the biggest challenges that any career services professional faces on a daily basis, especially given the fact that most people are not born with this competence. Gracefully negotiating a room full of strangers can be daunting for a seasoned attorney, let alone a law student. Students may be envisioning a gauntlet of attorneys peppering them with questions about obscure legal topics, their plans for their entire career, and their grades, all while they are trying to hold a small plate of hors d'oeuvres, a beverage, and maintain some semblance of poise. If you can remove some of their fears with thorough preparation, you are more likely to have schmooze-ready students. Using a before, during, and after coaching plan provides students with the skills they need to make a stellar impression in any networking situation.

Students will be more relaxed if you let them know as much as possible about an event before they arrive. Send an email to students that lists the following details:

1. The names, titles, and employers of the event participants (noting any alumni), with a suggestion to do a bit of research. The students can then identify anyone they would like to meet, and feel confident that they will be able to make adequate small talk.
2. A blurb briefly describing what you know about the event. For a recent panel presentation on the subject of diversity in the workforce held at a large law firm, I made sure the students knew how to get there and how much time it would take, the format of the presentation (panelists speaking followed

by Q&A), and suggested good questions for them to ask during and after the event.

3. Required attire. In most cases, this is interview attire, but if it is business casual, offer tips on appropriate apparel. Before visiting the campus of a large corporation, I let students know that there would be a lot of walking and stairs so that they would wear comfortable shoes. If weather is going to be a factor, remind students to wear a coat or bring an umbrella.
4. A reminder to bring photo identification and cell phone restrictions, if any. Visits to the Federal courthouse require students to surrender their cell phones, and employers with a security desk will most likely require photo identification.
5. A reminder to use their best manners. I ask that the students thank every person we come in contact with, from the security guard who lets us in the building to the host of the event. This helps them to develop the habit of politeness towards everyone.

Now that the students have the particulars of the event, the next step is to guide them during the actual event. Consider yourself their safe zone, there to provide moral support. Some suggestions:

1. Arrive early to touch base with students, review their goals for the event, and introduce them to the hosts.
2. Identify people who will be of interest to students, whether due to their practice area, volunteer activities, or connection to your law school.

3. Circulate during the event to introduce students to people and make sure that they are not committing inadvertent faux pas (e.g., monopolizing someone's time, fidgeting, excessive consumption of alcohol).
4. Recognize when it is time to leave and gather students to thank the host. Ambitious students may be unaware that while they want to stay and make a good impression, attorneys will likely be anxious to get back to work or go home.

Hopefully, your students had a wonderful time, circulated with ease, and were able to practice their networking techniques. Capitalize on their confidence as soon as possible to reinforce their positive experience. Students may not realize that the contacts made during the event are useless without follow-up. Guide students through this final step by:

1. Sending a thank-you email to your hosts and then forward this to your students, along with any positive feedback about the event. Suggest that they send a prompt thank-you email as well.
2. Reminding the students to send a LinkedIn invite to everyone they met.
3. Encouraging the students to reach out to their newly-made connections to ask if they are able to meet for coffee, lunch, etc. to further develop the relationship.

This entire process can be lengthy, and, at times, frustrating. In most instances, though, the time I spend coaching my students results in a positive experience for all involved. It is a true pleasure to watch these fledgling attorneys mingling with confidence! Employers notice this preparation, and I often hear comments like, "Your students were very prepared," or "I was impressed by how professional your students are." This is the time to give yourself a well-deserved pat on the back for helping your students stand out, make the contacts that will help further their careers, and acquire the expertise that will benefit them both as students and practicing attorneys. As Alexander Graham Bell noted, "Before anything else, preparation is the key to success." ■

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