

Business Development Alternatives to the Golf Course

Elizabeth F. Collura

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My first year out of law school, I resigned myself to the inevitability of taking golf lessons. There were few things that interested me less than golf—a trip to the dentist, perhaps—but I considered golf a necessity of the profession. That first year, I did not fit golf lessons into my schedule. The second year came and went, and I still had not managed to enroll. Eventually, I realized there can be a life in law without golf. Moreover, diversity in business development approaches will ensure your firm sweeps a broad brush in its exposure to potential clients and business opportunities. So if you, like me, are determined to stay off the links, here are some fresh ideas for making connections.

Take a Class

A class provides an automatic topic of conversation, which is especially helpful if you tend to be shy. Cooking classes tend to be taught in small groups and provide an activity to get the conversation rolling, but they have enough downtime that you can chat. They are also a one-time event, or a short series, so they will not take an exhausting toll on your schedule. Similarly, becoming a regular at a lecture series gives an easy go-to topic to start off a conversation. My personal favorite is the CreativeMornings lecture series, which focuses on art, technology, social issues and innovation. CreativeMornings lectures take place monthly in more than 70 cities worldwide and feature a short networking breakfast before the talk gets under way.

Plan an Event

Whatever issue or cause tugs at your heartstrings, there is a nonprofit nearby that could use your help with fundraising events. Being on a host committee, rounding up sponsors and enjoying the celebrations is less demanding on time and money than serving on a board of directors, but it is an extremely helpful way to aid a nonprofit in reaching its goals. This role is an appropriate fit if you have already been involved with the nonprofit, or if you are close with someone who is and who will endorse you to the organization's decision-makers. Serving on a host committee is also a perfect reason to invite your contacts to attend and support an organization that is important to you.

Get Social With Social Media

Sitting behind a computer screen probably sounds like the complete opposite of making contacts. To the contrary, most cities have a vibrant in-person social scene that has its roots in online activities. In Pittsburgh, for example, there are regular Tweetups bringing together Twitter users for cocktail hours. Pittsburgh Restaurant Week likewise hosts food blogger parties and dinners twice a year, which bridge the computer-to-real-life divide. Better yet, step up your blog game and do some interviews. Starting an interview

blog is a perfect opportunity to reach out to people on the periphery of your network and get to know them better.

Try a Sport

Sure, golf is a sport, but there are so many other options. Many cities offer sports leagues, which offer a great opportunity to meet new people by sharing a team with them, or even playing against them. Soccer, softball and even bowling have plenty of downtime for you to get to know the other players. Interest in sports crosses all industries, instead of the stereotypical country club crowd.

Invite People in to Your Universe

Consider hosting a panel discussion in your office on unique legal issues. Panel discussions are nothing new, but firms often focus on using such educational opportunities to court high-level corporate types. Young lawyers frequently do not yet have those high-level contacts. However, hosting a panel discussion that is open to the public and targeting legal issues that are confronted by and important to your contacts in more junior-level positions will foster trust early on. Demonstrating your capabilities early on, and helping whenever you have the opportunity, will foster trust and should leave a lasting impression.

Get Caffeinated

Grabbing a cup of coffee is usually an outing reserved for people you already know, but why not use it as a mechanism to meet someone you don't know? Consider people you have seen in local papers, pursuing projects you find interesting, or perhaps even people who social media networks identify as shared friends. Send a message and simply say that you are interested in getting to know them. Importantly, be interested. Do not use a coffee date as an opportunity to only prattle on about yourself. Drive your conversation with questions, and let your coffee date tell his or her story.

Follow Your Passion

Getting together with others who share an interest, whether that interest is reading, cross-stitching or skeet shooting (or even golf), is networking gold, so long as your interest is authentic. Whatever your passion is, there are others who have the same interest. Get to know them, as well as that hobby. Networking is most valuable when it naturally develops out of shared interests. Consider it making friends, rather than business development, and your efforts will be both more satisfying and rewarding. It does not matter what you pursue, just put your heart into it.

With any approach that you take, it is critical to remember to make the jump beyond the initial conversation. It is easy enough to have casual small talk, but your efforts are for naught unless you exchange contact information. Adding a new acquaintance on LinkedIn after meeting them at an event is perfectly appropriate and is a helpful mechanism for staying in touch with your new contact.

Also, with any networking event, it is important to set appropriate and realistic goals. If you are extremely outgoing and love to work a crowd, making 10 new contacts in one night may be a breeze. But for the introverted or networking-event-averse, a smaller number may be more appropriate. It is as valuable to participate in an activity and have quality conversations with three new people as it is to have quick chats with many more.

Elizabeth F. Collura is an associate in Clark Hill Thorp Reed's commercial and corporate litigation practice group in the firm's Pittsburgh office. She counsels on legal issues relating to use of social media, and represents clients in a broad array of litigation, including disputes involving fiduciary duties, contractual obligations and civil rights. She can be reached at ecollura@clarkhillthorpreed.com.