

Trade Associations, Conferences, and Events: Creating Warmth and “Reach” Out of Thin Air

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By Mike White



“Oh, how I hate cocktail receptions . . .” “If my practice group leader berates me about attending more trade association events I think I’m going to scream . . .” “Ever since my first day of kindergarten, there are few things in life I hate more than walking into a large room of people I don’t know, knowing that I have to spend the next few hours in that room trying to make small talk . . .” These are some of the refrains I hear from law firm partners who are struggling to (what I call) build up their funnel of relationships and dialogue. It is true that many partners spend too much time at the wrong large group events, and hanging out at cocktail receptions can be an affirmatively bad use of one’s time as a lawyer trying to develop business. With that said, as with most bus dev strategies, a focused and effective exposure to the right large group environments can pay off handsomely over time.

Why Do It?

Client cultivation is a game of both quantity and quality: you’ve got to do enough of the right things to create an effective portfolio of activity capable of producing yield. The same is true of large group involvements, whether they be industry sector trade association events, cocktail receptions, etc. From a quantitative – or rather, efficiency – perspective, if you focus on doing corporate and real estate work for convenience store operators, for example, it could make good sense to attend a trade association event of large independent convenience store owners and operators. Among other things, seeing members of your prospect universe coalescing in one place over a concentrated period of time is very efficient for you. Moreover, qualitatively speaking, or from an effectiveness perspective, it can also pay off in spades to be seen at a trade association event. When you attend an industry event attended primarily by non-lawyer industry people, you are signaling to the industry that you “get them.” All legal work in your practice may look the same to you – but to convenience store owners, their particular transactions are unique to their industry sector, and they would like to work with a convenience store professional who happens to be a lawyer as opposed to the converse.

So . . . What Do I Do?

Lawyers have a disserving view of what trade association and event related involvements are supposed to accomplish. While events are helpful for profile building and establishing differentiated expertise, the goal here is to put yourself in a position **over**

time to have a portfolio of **individual discussions/meetings** with real prospects, and connectors to prospects. That's it! If your attendance at a particular event doesn't serve that goal, then you might not want to participate.

Given that we want to set the table for well qualified **individual** dialogue with prospects and connectors, below are a few tips relating to event/conference participation and strategy:

- **Before The Conference: Get the attendee list for this year or last year well ahead of the event, and reach out**
 - Study the list and isolate a subset of attendees of particular interest, or "persons of particular interest" ("PPIs").
 - Email each of your PPIs something along the lines of " . . . I see you're planning to attend the xyz conference next month. I'm planning to be there, and hope we get a chance to bump into each other. Among other things I'd like to hear more about (something related to **their** business or **their** market). Safe travels, and hope to see you next month . . ." If you don't know that they are attending this year but you do know that they attended last year, then reference their attendance last year as some kind of indication they'll be attending this year.
- **At The Conference: Gain permission for post-conference dialogue**
 - Your primary objective **at** the conference is to gain permission from PPIs to speak with them offline a week or two after the conference. This is a numbers game, so you want to make as many "quick strike" introductions as possible. Introduce yourself quickly (albeit obligingly), bend over backwards saying you don't want to interrupt and take up their time to speak now, and ask if it would be alright to "ping" them via email about chatting a week or two after the conference. If you handle this well, the object of your overture will be relieved and even blissfully happy that you're not burdening him or her with time consuming substantive discussion at the conference (as he or she wants to burden others with such!). Like Vietnam, get in, declare victory, and get out!
 - In all likelihood, you won't have a chance to meet or introduce yourself to most PPIs who received your pre-conference email. That's okay. Don't worry! More on this below.
 - You will have time for one to three pretty substantive discussions with PPIs at the conference. Feel free to learn about what those PPIs are trying to do with their business, their individual role in advancing that agenda, and any other "points of pain" or priorities you can uncover. No "selling" here: these discussions are about establishing "connection" so that they will want to have a next discussion with you. With that said, you might want leave these discussions planting an idea or two about how the two of you could "make 1+1=3."
- **After The Conference: Follow-up! Follow-up! Follow-up!**
 - For those PPI's you actually met at the conference, send out a follow up email (or leave a voice mail) along the following lines: " . . . I'm glad we had a chance to bump into each other. Let me know if you have time to catch up over the phone (or over coffee) sometime over the next couple of weeks. In addition to learning more about where you're trying to go with your business and the people in our market with whom you find yourself spending most of your time, I wanted to share with you some perceptions of our market that you might be able to validate and help me think through, or alternatively poke some holes in. In any event, if you'd be game to do a call (or let me buy you a cup of coffee), I think we'd have a good exchange . . . "
 - For those PPIs you did not meet at the conference, send out a follow up email (or leave a voice mail message) along the following lines " . . . I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to meet at the conference. When I did see you in one of the exhibit rooms, we were both heads down in discussion. In any event, I'd welcome the opportunity to chat with you over the phone (or over coffee) . . . (repeat balance of script above applicable to PPIs you did meet at conference).

A Note on Trade Associations

- The key to trade association involvement is not the number of committees you can oversee and amount of time you can commit, but rather the membership roster. The membership roster is all you care about! Once you have the membership roster you are in a position to get to the individual dialogue you want to have with PPIs in the association. Without having to spend a lot of time at the association, and in an effort to get in dialogue with trade association PPIs, you can send out emails to PPIs along the following lines " . . . I understand from _____ (membership director) that you have been involved in the xyz trade association for some time. I'm a new member and wanted to see if you might allow me to sit down with you (or have a call with you) to pick your brain about how I might be able to make best use of my involvement in the xyz association: i.e., what meetings and events are most useful, how you feel you've benefited from your participation, etc. If you'd be game to get together (or do a call) sometime over the next few weeks, I'd welcome the opportunity to get together. . . ."

Creating "Warmth" Out of Thin Air

If you follow the above approach you can get in dialogue with a rich population of prospects and connectors – so-called PPIs – without having the benefit of an introduction through others. In other words, you can create "warmth" out of thin air! Conferences and trade association involvements can be very leverageable **if** you use them the right way. So go ahead: create some "warmth," and get close to your market!