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Dear Career Doctor

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I am a junior lawyer in the corporate/commercial group of a medium-sized firm. I have been fortunate in the current economic climate to retain my position. However, the pressure is now on lawyers at all levels to market to both our existing clients and to new clients and to attend as many functions as possible (with the added directive of returning with at least two business cards).

We have not been given much guidance from the partners and senior associates as to how to go about this. As a junior solicitor who has limited client contact, how do I maintain the few existing client relationships I do have? What steps do I need to take to attract new business? And when I do get taken along to client functions, are there any tips you can suggest as to how to survive at such a function?

SURVIVOR

Dear Survivor

The following are a few ideas on how to go about getting started, in building relationships and networking skills.

Maintaining existing clients

You have said that as a junior lawyer, you have limited client contact in any event. As an initial step, work on fostering those valuable client relationships, albeit few, as well as possible. Ensure that any work you produce for your clients is timely and of a high quality. Not only will you earn the respect of these current clients, but these people could be fantastic referral sources which will in turn attract more business for you and the firm.

In this climate, with budget constraints, there may not necessarily be many opportunities available to you to attend smaller functions such as client lunches and the like. However, if you are lucky enough to be taken along, then given that you have a relationship with the particular client, you will hopefully be able to strike up a conversation and make it through the lunch. I always suggest that it is worthwhile to go in armed with a few topics that are not work-related that you can talk knowledgeably about.

Attracting potential clients

In terms of attracting new business, referrals are one way to do this. So if you are on top of your game, hopefully, those clients that you have worked for in the past will reward you by recommending you to others.

Tap into your own social network by attending functions such as the many Young Lawyers' events held throughout the year and let others know what you do (in a professional sort of way). By marketing yourself, you are marketing the firm.

Join related industry organisations and professional associations. Try to attend as many industry seminars and events as possible as these functions provide an excellent forum in which to network to existing and potential clients.

Wherever you get the opportunity to attend functions that are likely to be attended by current or potential clients, seize those opportunities (even if the function does not necessarily relate to work undertaken by your particular practice group – you can always refer work to other practice groups of the firm).

Perhaps direct some of your effort into drafting and publishing (either internally or externally) articles relevant to your specialist area. You could then go one step further and offer to make a presentation to existing and potential clients. If this is too daunting, you could rally together some of your peers and do it as a team.

Attending business functions

To a young lawyer experiencing their first business function, it can be daunting to be expected to make small talk with someone, let alone return with more than two business cards.

Here are a few tips on how to survive a business function:

- Before going to the function, see if you can have a look at the guest list. It always helps if you know a few people in the crowd that you can align yourself with when you arrive.
- It always helps if you buddy up with someone, preferably a partner or senior associate, but if this is not possible, one of your peers. This takes the pressure off making all the conversation.
- Although it is a work function, try to enjoy yourself and relax (but not too much).
- As I said above, go in armed with a few topics that are not work-related that you can talk knowledgeably about.
- Move beyond initial introductions and find out about people's businesses and interests. Put in the time and effort to develop professional relationships that you believe to be worthwhile.

As a follow up to these events, when someone impresses you as a potential client, do some research on their organisation and next time you meet, suggest ways you and your firm could assist them with certain projects or challenges they face. Ask the marketing department to assist you with a package of useful and relevant information for the potential client.

CAREER DOCTOR

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