

Spot the client and run?



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Your first reaction might be to run and provided the client has not seen you first this could be exactly what you need to do. Unfortunately, this will not always be an option. Being prepared may help save your reputation and could even improve your client relationships and networks.

Interaction with clients outside the work environment is inevitable and one of the many experiences that university cannot possibly prepare us for. It is also often overlooked by our principals and mentors during our early years. Whether it is at the supermarket, local bar or restaurant,

knowing exactly what to say and do is easier said than done.

Although probably more likely to occur with regional and suburban lawyers (where the watering holes and eateries are few and far between) these handy tips may be equally of value to city lawyers.

Assuming you have been spotted first (meaning the running away like a small frightened child option is no longer available) you will have to quickly judge how best to deal with the situation. It will depend on the particular client and circumstance when determining the appropriate response but here are a few tips to keep in mind.

Do not run away

If you do run you can expect the first question from your client when you are next in the office to be: "Why did you run away from me?" Providing a credible response is impossible and your client will probably perceive your actions as blatantly rude. Landing face first on the pavement during your attempted escape should also be avoided, so take a deep breath, stay stationary.

Stay calm and be polite

It is easy to forget appropriate etiquette when you are caught off guard but if you

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN A CLIENT APPROACHES YOU AT THE LOCAL PUB WANTING LEGAL ADVICE?

can manage the pleasantries you may even be able to strengthen the relationship and improve your rapport with the client. This is particularly relevant for commercial and business clients where “small talk” and relationship building is important to guarantee return business.

Do not give advice

Apart from raising the eyebrows of your principals when your next bill narrative states “providing advice in aisle 5 at Woolworths” it is clearly not appropriate to discuss sensitive and confidential information in public. Although the client will most likely instigate the conversation, it is your job to shut it down. Simply remind the client that they need to contact you at the office to discuss legal matters.

Do not breach confidentiality

Depending on the context, mere identification of a client can be a breach of confidentiality. This is particularly relevant for family and criminal law clients who may wish to keep their involvement with you a secret from family, colleagues and friends.

Network

Also context dependent, meeting a client in a social business setting may provide you with an opportunity to create or expand your networks. Be sure to take advantage of this when being introduced to a client’s business associates as it could be a source of future work.

Speak with your principals

There is nothing like the advice that comes from experience. So ask the senior practitioners of your firm what they do in these awkward situations.

While avoiding the situation in the first place is the preferred approach, the thought of online grocery shopping, drinking at home and generally avoiding public areas, is certainly not appealing. For some of us, contact with our clients in public places is inevitable, so when it occurs it is important to promptly assess the situation and act in a courteous yet professional manner while taking advantage of any potential benefits. ■

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