

How to form a non-business business connection

Attorneys should reach out to clients not to talk shop but 'just because'

By BERNADETTE STARZEE

Attorneys are in the relationship business, and they must work on the relationship even when there's no business.

"With a few caveats, contacting clients outside of a specific matter is a really good idea that a lot of attorneys don't get around to doing," said Allison Shields, president of Legal Ease Consulting in Mount Sinai. "By not reaching out to clients after a matter concludes, lawyers miss opportunities for future business."

Clients, however, may be wary of an attorney's out-of-the-blue call to see how things are going. "Depending on the relationship, the contact can come across as self-serving," Shields said. "You must lay the groundwork – for instance, if you were totally unavailable during your representation of the client and now you're calling, the client will be wondering, 'What do you want?'"

By taking time to get to know clients and taking a genuine interest in their business, attorneys can win future business and referrals. "Companies want to work with people who care about them and don't just see them as a source of revenue," Shields added.

A few at a time

It's difficult to take time when it's in short supply. Attorneys who have a system for reaching out to clients "just because" keep their goals realistic.

"Every week I put a reminder in my calendar to get in touch with four or five clients, contacts and friends that I haven't talked to in a while," said Robert Londin, a partner at Jaspan Schlesinger in Garden City. "If clients had a good experience with you, they won't mind your reaching out to touch base and reminisce," he said. "It's a way to make sure you stay on the front burner if some-



THOMAS STAGG: Not reaching out means lost connections.

thing comes up. In this economy, you can't be too shy about contacting people." When Londin has time, he invites clients to float questions by him off the meter. Recently, he gave advice to a friend who was interested in investing seed capital in startup companies. As a result, Londin received a referral to one of the startups in the investment portfolio.

In addition to more high-tech methods, Thomas Stagg makes it a point to go through his Rolodex to jog his memory of clients he hasn't contacted in a while. A partner and a litigator for Garden City-based Stagg, Terenzi, Confusione & Wabnik, Stagg has periods when he's swamped with trial and deposition work, but averages at least one such contact a week. He recently reached out to ask how a former banking industry client was doing. Due to a change in its business, the client hadn't needed the services of his firm for a couple of years. But the call led to the former client inviting the law firm to put on a continuing education seminar.

Goldberg Segalla, which has 11 offices in four states, including one in Garden City, has a client relationship department that initiates contact with clients, in addition to what the attorneys do on their own. The department arranges annual meetings in which relevant parties at the firm sit down with each

client to find out if the client's expectations are being met and to make the client aware of the firm's geographic reach and breadth of services.

"We find that our clients are thrilled to have the opportunity to discuss their needs with us," said Paul Devine, a Garden City-based partner.

Electronic contact

Goldberg Segalla is active with social media, sending industry-specific blogs and Twitter feeds on various topics. The firm has a Facebook account, and the individual attorneys use LinkedIn to learn what people in their network are doing, Devine said.

Stagg is starting to use LinkedIn more and more.

"It's a great tool for staying in touch with clients and referral sources," he said. Like LinkedIn, Google Alerts is invaluable for attorneys, who can receive alerts based on keywords, such as clients' names, company names and industry-specific terms.

"An attorney might hear that a business won an award or got a new partner, and they can pick up the phone or send a card and say 'Congratulations' and 'I'm here if you need anything,'" Shields said.

Personal staff contact

While Memorex may work fine, there's nothing like live.

"It's important to spend time with clients, whether or not you have current business," said Bernard Hyman, managing partner of East Meadow-based Certilman Balin Adler & Hyman. Hyman typically gets together with clients socially about two or three times a week, to have lunch, play golf or catch a ballgame.

"Getting together with a client outside the business context can be a great way to get to know him one on one," Shields said. "And inviting several clients who would be good strategic alliances or referral sources for each other to a ballgame or another event can add value to the services you provide to your clients – they will see you as a connector."