

Young Lawyers

By Shruti Chopra

Networking is key in distinguishing yourself in today's competitive legal marketplace



Chopra

When I moved to New York City in the spring of 2015, I was not only transitioning between cities, but also between careers. After graduating with a LL.M. from U.C. Berkeley's School of Law, I moved back to India to work at a full-service law firm, and so, had no legal network in New York.

I also quickly realized that in a competitive legal market like New York's, there are several qualified candidates, and I had to distinguish myself, but stay competitive regarding my achievements and qualifications. This meant finding opportunities that would allow me to build on my experiences and add new skills to my repertoire.

After taking the New York bar exam in the summer of 2015, I shifted focus back to my career. Still awaiting work authorization, working at a law firm or in an in-house capacity was a while away. However, instead of letting that hold me back, I decided it was the most opportune time to build my network, and personal brand. As I began, I remembered a lesson from law school: if you do not ask, the answer is *always* no.

Over time, I learned a few other important lessons:

Existing network is best place to begin

When someone knows you, and is aware of your goals and ambitions, they are often more willing to help. This could mean making introductions, helping with your resume, or providing access to events you might otherwise not know about.

My first break came by way of my husband's colleague, who knew I was a dual-qualified lawyer. She had a friend looking for expertise in the Indian legal and regulatory market. Even though the opportunity didn't align with my ambitions, it allowed me to begin building a career in New York, and learn first-hand how start-ups function.

The role involved interacting with outside counsel; after we met professionally, I invited the partner out for coffee, which she graciously accepted. That was the start of a long-standing relationship, and said partner has since become a professional mentor of mine.

Leverage bar associations, both local and national

Many bar associations offer free or heavily discounted membership opportunities to young lawyers. These associations host panels, allow volunteers on committees and sub-committees, participate in pro-bono opportunities, and host networking

happy hours.

I've had the chance to stay on top of legal issues by volunteering on committees and drafting memoranda, improve my legal research and writing skills, as well as get published through bar associations.

Attend panels and conferences

Attending panels and conferences is a great way to both earn CLE credit, and build long-lasting connections. Panels and conferences can range from 15 people to over a 1,000 in attendance, providing an opportunity to meet leaders in every field; they also grant access to lawyers you otherwise might not have access to, given the more relaxed networking environment—one with no preconceived notions.

Always make it a point to interact with panelists, and build relationships by subsequently meeting for coffee, lunch or even an informational interview. In fact, it was through networking with a panelist, and being transparent about my goals, that I ended up interviewing with one of my dream companies. However, you must be prepared with some knowledge of the topics discussed; researching panelists never hurts either.

Follow up and stay in touch

Following up with people you meet is the most important aspect of networking. Make sure to write a thank-you note even if you've had only a short phone call with them. Keep in touch by sharing information that you think might be relevant, and keep them up to date regarding your career.

Take an interest in *their* interests, and always be available to volunteer your time when they require assistance.

Don't be afraid

Many young lawyers are afraid to approach senior practitioners, because either they aren't confident, or they assume senior lawyers will not have an interest in connecting. The biggest lesson I learned over the past 18 months is 'not to be afraid.'

Most senior lawyers are happy to chat, and are genuinely interested in young lawyers' perspectives. When impressed, they are willing to refer you to colleagues, and guide you on specific aspects of their practice area. Always be courteous, curious and confident.

Networking has played a key role in my career. Whether it was an opportunity to work as a research assistant on a book while still in law school, my first job after graduating from law school, or even my current position; they all had one thing in common—leveraging the world of networking to gain experiences and opportunities. ♦

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Bench & bar

President Claire P. Gutekunst hosted members of the New York State Court of Appeals and notable bar leaders at the Upstate Women's Bench and Bar Leaders Reception on March 20 at the State Bar Center. [Photo by Minika Udo]