



# Navigating Legal Conferences

Unspoken Rules for Early-Career Lawyers (and Law Students)

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**F**ew things inspire more dread in early-career lawyers than the words “networking conference.” You know you’re supposed to go—that making connections matters for your career—but nobody actually tells you what to do once you’re standing in a hotel ballroom holding a name tag and a lukewarm coffee.

Last month, I watched a 2L stand frozen near the coffee station for 15 minutes, pretending to be very interested in the cream and sugar options. When I finally introduced myself, she looked relieved. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to break into a conversation,” she admitted. “I know I’m supposed to network, but I have no idea what that actually means.”

Most of us don’t. The standard advice about legal conferences—“network effectively,” “make meaningful connections,” “follow up professionally”—is useless without specifics. But over time, I’ve learned there are some concrete steps lawyers can take to make networking conferences less intimidating and more productive. Following these unspoken rules has helped me, as a first-generation lawyer, navigate dozens of conference rooms (and coffee stations) with ease.

## Start the Conversation Before You Arrive

The most effective networkers don’t wait until they’re in the hotel lobby. Identify two or

three speakers or attendees whose work you genuinely admire and reach out via LinkedIn or email before the event. A simple note like, “I’m looking forward to your panel on data privacy next week; I’ll be sure to stop by afterward” transforms you from a cold stranger into a scheduled acquaintance. This single step significantly lowers the social friction of that first in-person introduction and gives you a natural opening when you do meet face-to-face.

## The Question-With-a-Hook Strategy

When a panel opens for Q&A, many attendees ask questions to showcase their own knowledge. This can be off-putting. Instead, use questions to build bridges. Stand up, state your name and affiliation clearly, and ask a question that invites the speaker to share a story: “What’s one thing about this new regulation that surprised you during implementation?”

This approach benefits the entire room, positions you as a thoughtful listener, and gives you a natural hook to approach the speaker afterward: “I really appreciated that story you shared about the compliance hurdle—it’s exactly what my team is navigating right now.” You’ve created a genuine connection point rather than forcing an introduction out of nothing.

## What to Actually Say When You Don’t Know What to Say

Many people report feeling uncomfortable walking into a room full of strangers, yet most networking advice offers platitudes about “being yourself” rather than concrete openers. Start with the event itself: “What brought you to this conference?” or “Have you attended any sessions yet?” These work because they’re contextual and give the other person an easy entry point.

The biggest networking killers: glancing at your phone during conversations (even briefly signals disinterest), continuing to push when someone shows disinterest, and dominating the conversation instead of listening. That third one is particularly common among law students who feel pressure to prove themselves. Ask questions, but listen 70% of the time.

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### The Logistics Nobody Mentions

You'll be juggling a plate, a drink, and potentially a business card while trying to shake hands and look professional. Eat before you arrive at evening receptions. If you do take food, choose items you can eat in one or two bites—nothing requiring a knife, nothing that drips, and nothing leaving your hands greasy. Skip spinach, poppy seeds, and strong garlic. Hold your drink in your left hand so your right hand stays dry and available for handshakes.

These details matter, and they are the unwritten rules of the professional world.

### How to Exit Conversations Gracefully

Knowing how to exit conversations is one of the most valuable professional skills you'll develop, serving you well beyond networking events. Watch for natural transitions—when the conversation lulls, when someone checks their watch, or when others approach your circle—then use these exact phrases: “I don't want to take up all your time; I know there are others who'd like to talk with you” or “I'm going to let you get back to the reception, but I'd love to stay in touch.”

If someone is monopolizing your time, try: “I've really enjoyed talking with you—let me grab your card before I circulate.”

### Skip the Business Cards—Use LinkedIn Instead

The usual pattern: you collect a stack of business cards, shove them in your pocket, and find them three weeks later with no memory of who these people were. LinkedIn's QR code feature solves this. Open the app, tap the search bar, and look for the QR code icon. Show your code to new connections—they scan it, and you're instantly connected with all your contact information already there. You can add a note immediately about your conversation while it's fresh.

This is particularly useful if you don't have business cards yet (many law students don't) or you don't use business cards. Instead of apologizing when someone asks for one, just say, “Let's connect on LinkedIn,” and then pull up your QR code. It's simple, professional, and more effective than a physical card you'll both forget about.

### Be the Connector, Not Just the Connected

Even as a junior lawyer or student, you can build immense social capital by connecting others. If you're talking to a peer who mentions an interest in intellectual property and you just met an IP specialist 10 minutes ago, offer the introduction—just check first that both parties are open to it.

Facilitating connections for others is the fastest way to be remembered as a leader in the room. It signals that you're observant, generous, and well-connected—even if you're just starting out. This shift from *What can I get?* to *How can I help?* fundamentally changes how people perceive you at these events.

### For Introverts and the Overwhelmed

Set a goal to meet one new person per event, and then increase the goal to meeting two or three people as you get more comfortable. Arrive early when crowds are smaller—the first few people in the room are just as nervous as you are. Volunteer at the registration desk or as a moderator; you'll have a defined role that provides natural conversation starters, and you'll meet every speaker and key attendee who checks in. Position yourself near high-traffic areas like the coffee station where people naturally pause and are more open to brief conversations.

Take breaks. Find a quiet corner, step outside, or sit in your car for 15 minutes. Understand how to manage your energy. Sustainable networking over multiple years matters more than burning out at a single event. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and the lawyers who succeed treat it that way.

### The Follow-Up That Actually Works

Most follow-up emails are “takers”—they ask for a meeting or a job. Stand out by being a “giver.” If an attorney mentioned an interest in a

specific niche or a challenge they're facing, your follow-up should include a resource: “It was great meeting you; you mentioned you were looking into the new Colorado privacy amendments, so I thought you might find this recent white paper interesting.”

Keep these emails under 100 words, reference your specific conversation, and send them within 48 hours after meeting. After that window, momentum dies. By providing immediate, uncompensated value, you move from being a “contact” to being a “collaborator.” This shifts the dynamic from a transactional request to a professional relationship.

### Realistic Goals and Long-Term Thinking

You probably won't land a job or secure a major client from a single conversation. What actually happens is slower: three years later, that attorney you met at a CLE thinks of you when their firm has an opening, or a panel discussion that seemed tangential at the time sparks an idea that shapes your career. You start seeing familiar faces at multiple events, and those repeated encounters build credibility.

The lawyers who succeed at conference networking don't try to meet everyone. They identify two to three people they want to meet beforehand, prepare specific questions, show up early, have substantive conversations, follow up within 48 hours, and then return to the same conferences year after year.

Start with one conference and attend it consistently. That attorney you awkwardly introduced yourself to as a 2L will remember your face by the time you're a third-year associate. The legal profession rewards this kind of sustained relationship-building. You don't need a prestigious pedigree or an extroverted personality—you just need the patience to let a 10-minute conversation grow into a 10-year professional relationship. **CL**



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