



The Opportunity Seed: Leverage Benevolence for Better Alliances

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Traditional sales techniques are frowned upon in the world of service professionals for good reason. Imagine a parallel universe wherein the downtown law firms hang posters in their lobbies stating, "We're having a new client special - get 50% off our standard retainer if you sign an engagement letter today!"

But solicitation guidelines often leave networking lawyers with only the most obvious marketing strategy of "let's do lunch". While it's important to put in face time with current and potential allies, the strategy is time-intensive and rarely leads to business. Without a good follow-up mechanism, you may never see them again, let alone their referrals.

In a perfect world, we would all give at least one referral a week to our trusted allies, they would reciprocate regularly, and we would provide consistent referral streams for one another until the end of time. But that's another parallel universe. In this one, it can be a challenge just to come up with one good referral for each of our most valuable colleagues. And given that it takes a few interactions to build the trust required to make a referral to a new ally, the process becomes laborious. But consider that "referral" is not synonymous with "lead". It can take the form of a thoughtful gesture, which also strengthens the alliance. The key is to plant Opportunity Seeds for the easiest kind of referral - content.

Opportunity Seeds are unobtrusive questions posed during a networking dialogue, designed to set up a follow-up action. They require little effort to plant, and they can blossom into goodwill and referral business. Here are some examples:

- "Have you ever read 'Nonstop Networking'? It's a great book."
- "I'm so glad tax season is over. My accountant is a godsend. Do you know George?"
- "Have you ever heard of 'The Bottom Line'? It's a useful resource for business development ideas."

Regardless of whether these topics lead to further conversation, they set you up as a giver when you email a link to a Nonstop Networking website, George's number, or this newsletter. And simply the fact that it was offered reflects well on you as someone who is well-informed, invested in an alliance, and who understands the concept of a two-way street.

It's even more impressive if you mail a copy of the article with a handwritten note on a personalized notecard. Since the advent of email, it is a rare professional who will bother with such old-school thoughtfulness. Have your assistant set up the process, copying your favorite articles from magazines that apply to multiple professions, such as Forbes or the Wall Street Journal. He or she can prepare a personalized notecard for each of your networking meals that day. This way it will require nothing more from you than a little bit of mindfulness during the networking lunch, and a few seconds that afternoon as you write "Great speaking with you - I thought you'd appreciate this" on a notecard. It can serve as your signature follow up policy.

The Opportunity Seed can also be used to glean an appropriate gift idea to reinforce client loyalty. The next time you have a conversation with a client, rather than opening with the usual "how was your weekend?" chit-chat, try an Opportunity Seed instead.

- "Have you seen any good movies that you would recommend for me to see with my kids this weekend?"
- "Would you happen to know of any good restaurants in the area where I could take my wife for a romantic dinner?" Your client's response will help you get to know them better, and provide the perfect gift of a DVD or dinner certificate to celebrate the completion of a case or project. They will mention how attentive you were when they speak with colleagues, and you will benefit from the PR.

If most of us added up all the hours we put in to networking every year, its value would exceed a good client retainer. Use the Opportunity Seed to tip the scales of reciprocity in your favor. It helps you maximize your precious time, and sets you apart from those competitors who network without the consistent practice of benevolence.