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## **Navigating Introvert Hell**

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# Practice

Advocacy

## Navigating ‘Introvert Hell’

You don’t have to be hard-charging to be an impactful legal networker

By Heidi K. Brown

A law firm partner once advised me to “grow a thicker skin!” when networking at legal conferences. He disfavored my quieter, one-on-one approach. I tried mirroring his extroverted, aggressive style. It didn’t work. I felt fake and awkward, annoyed and stressed. Years later, after writing *The Introverted Lawyer*, I finally understood why walking into a room of 300 lawyers or potential clients at a legal conference and feeling pressure to instantly forge business development connections felt daunting. The fluorescent lights, the sea of suits and the din of rapid-fire chatter seemed chaotic and not conducive to authentic conversation. I usually circled the perimeter, clutching a glass of pinot grigio, not knowing how to infiltrate this “club” to which everyone else already seemed to belong.

Last year, my entire perspective on networking changed. On the opening night of a legal conference, I attended the welcome dinner, a raucous affair in a brewery. High-powered lawyers hobnobbed near the buffet. The venue was loud, brightly lit and chock-full of gregarious extroverts. *What am I doing here?* I looped the rustic space, perused the appetizers, scanned nametags for conversation starters and chided myself for wanting to leave. I bumped into my co-panelist, who

mouthed, “This is introvert hell.”

Laughing, I responded, “Want to spend another half-hour here and then grab dinner at the hotel?” Newly emboldened as a team, we dove back in for 30 minutes, intermingling with different groups, inviting individuals to our panel and learning about other upcoming presentations that piqued our interest. We then hopped in an Uber, returned to the conference hotel and shared a wonderful dinner and vivacious conversation, solidifying a new friendship. Since that dinner, we have collaborated and cross-promoted one another’s work several times. This lasting connection sprung out of shared authenticity and vulnerability.

Instead of forcing extroversion in high-pressure networking scenarios that naturally drain our energy and cause unnecessary internal conflict, introverts can be powerful connectors by recognizing and capitalizing on our inherent strengths. For naturally quiet individuals, being a good networker is not—as is often suggested—about “boosting our confidence.” We are confident. We’re good at what we do. Instead, it’s about strategically choosing circumstances that

play to our gifts: impactful one-on-one connections in environments that ignite, instead of sap, our spark.

### A FEW STRATEGIES

“**Know thyself.**” Socrates championed this mantra. If you are a naturally quiet lawyer, first get to “know thyself”—your personality strengths and perceived challenges. Read books on introversion and understand why highly stimulating networking environments can feel energy-sapping—instead of energy-generating as they might be for extroverts. In what types of interpersonal interaction do we thrive? One-on-one? Small groups? Attending presentations and connecting with the speakers? Sports outings? Volunteering? In what venues of interpersonal interaction do we *not* thrive? I do *not* thrive in “speed networking,” small talk, situations involving constant interruption and high-pressure “sales” scenarios. Make a list of your networking likes and dislikes.

**Identify concrete, long-term and event-specific goals.** It’s important to identify *why* we want to develop business: Is it because someone is telling us we have to, or is it because it’s valuable for our personal growth and professional fulfillment? Let’s *own* exactly what we want for ourselves. Is the goal to land one giant client now, or plant multiple seeds of connection for the future? What type of clients or cases do we want five years or 10 years from now? What types of individuals—personality, character, demeanor and values—do we want to work with in the near and distant future? For specific events, is the goal to gather piles

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—HEIDI BROWN



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