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How To Wow The Crowd At Recruiting Dinners

By Erin Marie Daly

Law360, New York (August 11, 2010) -- Candidates with shining resumes can be competent and professional and still not get hired if they flub the all-important recruiting dinner. Legal experts weigh in with Law360 on the do's and don'ts of dining with name partners.

Do Your Homework On Your Dining Partners

Preparing in advance of the big dinner is essential, according to Douglas B. Richardson, an adjunct consultant with legal consulting firm Altman Weil Inc.

"The associate should not be asking questions to which he or she already knows the answer," he said.

Jennifer Huelskoetter, a partner at Bowman and Brooke LLP, said doing basic research on the firm and its partners is crucial to proving your interest in the job is genuine.

Saying you want to focus on an area of work that the firm doesn't practice in is a major tipoff that a potential hire is not a good fit, according to Huelskoetter. Not getting the name of a partner right and knowing nothing about the background of the partners at your dinner table are also dead giveaways, she said.

Ask for a list of dining partners in advance of the meal and read the attorneys' biographies before the dinner date, suggested Anna Grizzle, a partner at Bass Berry & Sims PLC.

"Knowing something about the partners at the dinner leaves a favorable impression," she said. "It shows you cared enough to prepare for the dinner. It will also give you conversation starters. For example, if you see that the partner graduated from Alabama, I suspect that the partner would be more than happy to discuss Alabama's national championship with you."

Be Interested, Not Interesting

Engaging in the conversation without taking over the spotlight is crucial to showing your potential bosses that you are someone colleagues and clients will find pleasant to work with, according to Grizzle.

"In looking to hire a future representative of the firm, the partners are evaluating a candidate's ability to interact socially," Grizzle said. "Therefore, it is important to be a part of the conversation without dominating it."

Show your potential employers through your demeanor that you understand the norms and expectations that frame the conversation — and your subsequent employment with the firm, Richardson suggested.

"You have to show that you know and accept the rules," he said. "This is not the time to make — through dress or speech — powerful statements about your values, your independence or your unwillingness to align your career with other peoples' expectations."

Your No. 1 goal during the dinner is to prove that in addition to your stellar resume, you have the "emotional intelligence" necessary to shine under battle conditions, Richardson said.

This display of emotional intelligence translates into a stronger and more immediate sense of "fit" and helps establish a rapport or chemistry with those you're trying to impress, he said.

"Millennials are receiving a lot of knocks for being narcissistic, self-interested and lacking in face-to-face interpersonal skills," Richardson said. "The recruiting dinner must be seen as an opportunity to rebut those negative stereotypes."

When the parties are trying to establish rapport but one is clearly the "alpha dog," it is important to understand how the frame of this recruiting dinner is shaped by the more powerful person's perspectives and needs, Richardson said.

"Active listening skills are essential — talk less, listen more and ask a lot of questions of the 'how did you succeed?' variety," Richardson suggested.

Mind Your Manners

How a candidate interacts with the waitstaff gives great insight into how the candidate will

treat others, according to Grizzle.

"Treat waitstaff with respect," Grizzle advised. "If the candidate is rude, that candidate is an easy no. I am concerned that if a candidate cannot treat waitstaff with respect, the candidate will also behave inappropriately when working with support staff or opposing counsel."

This same tip holds true when the candidate interacts with the support staff at the offices during the interview, Grizzle said.

"If the candidate is rude to the receptionist or other support staff, the decision makers will hear about it," she said.

While a recruiting dinner is not an etiquette test, bad manners leave a negative impression, Grizzle said.

"Remember the lessons your mom taught you, like chewing with your mouth closed and not talking with a mouth full of food," she said.

And it should go without saying, but if alcohol is served, make sure you don't drink too much even if your nerves are through the roof, Grizzle cautioned.

"If you drink too much, you will become a legend at the firm, but only in the sense of 'remember that recruit who ...'"

The recruit who wasn't hired, that is.

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