

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

HOW TO SAY “NO”

Who knows why we do it, but most of us tend to say “yes” to things when we ought to say “no.” You know the drill: Can you bring cupcakes to the party? Sure. I’m jammed; can you handle this temporary restraining order for me before 5 p.m.? Well, okay. Will you come speak at our conference? Of course!

Before you realize it, your calendar is full through next August and you’re feeling frustrated, used, and cranky.

Tips on How to Say “No” When “No” Is What You Want to Say

You aren’t a starving puppy. Pups eat everything put down for them, assuming there may never be any food again. You are an intelligent and successful professional with ample opportunities. In fact, if you do a great job of saying “no” to things you don’t want, you’ll probably get more chances to say “yes” to things you do want. Try these tips, and your calendar will be your friend again.

- **Be respectful.** Listen carefully, and don’t interrupt the asker. Respect the person’s request, then respect your own right to decline.

- **Make it simple.** Often when we are trying new ways of behaving, we over-compensate or are clumsy. Don’t raise your voice, don’t get upset, and don’t ask for permission or forgiveness. A simple, well-modulated “no” followed by a “thank you” will do.

- **Don’t feel you must explain or justify.** Perhaps your reason for declining is personal or just something you don’t wish to discuss with a stranger. Try “I’m

not able to do that,” or “Sorry I can’t help you,” or “Not this time, thank you.”

- **Assign responsibility for your refusal to something else.** “That sounds very nice; unfortunately, my calendar is booked solid.” Now it’s your calendar’s fault. Stand firm. Avoid engaging in discussion or negotiation. If you know from the start that this is an invitation you neither want nor need but the requester pursues you, simply change the subject. Or say, “I’m sorry, but I have to go.” Otherwise, you’re in for a long discussion and may ultimately be persuaded to accept against your better judgment.

- **Refer, refer, refer.** If it’s a speaking engagement or another equally flattering request that is not really well-suited to your plans, suggest others who might fill the opening well. Then add, “Please say that I sent you.” (Why not earn some goodwill?)

- **Be very clear with yourself about when to say “no.”** If the request is something that will benefit you, those you care about, your colleagues, your social group, or a cause that is special to you, there is likely a reason to say “yes.” But how can you really know unless you know who and what you are working toward? Doing just any old speaking engagement is not smart business development. However, if you’re a corporate employment lawyer and you’re invited to address 200 senior human resources executives, then you’ll want to find a way to make it work. Having a clear plan (business, family, social) will make it easier to decline invita-

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tions without missing opportunities that you would really like to accept.

● **If all else fails, use the multipurpose response.** Smile graciously and say, “Not just now, thank you.” It works in nearly all situations.

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This article was originally published in Attorney at Work, March 10, 2011. Reprinted with permission.

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