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Engaging Associates in Business Development

Volume 38 Number 5

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About the Author

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A law firm partner recently was telling me about her son, who joined a Am Law 50 firm last fall. In his first week on the job, he was asked to download the contacts from his phone into the firm's database. Even though he was a brand-new lawyer, the firm obviously reasoned that his contacts were an asset to the firm.



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More and more law firms are recognizing the importance and value of involving their young lawyers in marketing and business development activities, from networking to formal "beauty contests." First, gone are the days when a lawyer could practice for seven years, become a partner and then think about building a book of business. In most firms having a book of business—or at least demonstrating the prospect of doing so—is the number-one factor in determining who gets into the partnership ranks. So it is only fair for the firm to provide its young lawyers with advice and information on how to develop a practice.

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In addition, clients are paying closer attention to associates. Clients often want to know who works on their matters so as to have a better sense of the skills, strengths and experience on the team. Many clients are now inquiring about retention rates as well, understanding that stability in the associate ranks translates into more consistency and efficiency in the services they receive.

So what can partners do to help associates in the marketing and

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business development arena? Outlined below is a list of possibilities.

COACHING AND TRAINING

Partners should provide guidance to associates on effective ways to engage in marketing. What outside organizations would be appropriate for their level, and how should they get involved? What thought-leadership or credentialing activities, such as writing or speaking, would be beneficial at various points of their careers? How can they provide great client service? How should they be networking? And, finally, what should they be doing at different stages to increase their chances of developing business some day? Some firms provide partners as marketing coaches or mentors; others develop training programs that incorporate partners as teachers.

For example, partners should encourage associates to maintain their contacts—from undergraduate school, law school and beyond (e.g., jobs, clerkships, etc.)—and to build relationships with their contemporaries at other professional firms or client businesses. Today's law firm associates might be tomorrow's Fortune 500 general counsel or potential referral sources, but these current contacts won't be of any value if they aren't nurtured and sustained over time.

SHADOWING

As helpful as coaching and training are, watching someone who is good at something is an even better way to learn. Partners should include associates in marketing and business development activities whenever possible. For example, a partner could take an associate to a client meeting, lunch or social event; include an associate in a networking function; take an associate along to an organizational meeting; or invite an associate to sit in the audience when giving a presentation.

For instance, an associate who is invited to attend a cross-selling meeting, to discuss a new service area with an existing client, will learn how to open the meeting, the questions to ask, how to talk about the firm and how to conclude the meeting. It's one thing to read about the process in an article; it's another to see a partner in action.

INVOLVING THEM IN ACTIVITIES

Another valuable way to impart marketing and business development skills is for partners to give associates opportunities to collaborate on activities. Associates can draft, research or coauthor an article on a substantive topic. They can research or co-present at seminars or conferences. They can serve on committees that the partners chair, conduct research on clients and prospects, or prepare the draft of a proposal.

For example, partners should invite associates to participate in

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formal pitch meetings with prospective clients. First, this will show the prospect that the firm values its associates and considers them vital participants on the team. Second, by playing a role in the meeting, the associate will gain firsthand experience on how to pitch business.

INVOLVING THEM ON TEAMS

Studies have shown that involving lawyers on teams provides a firm with numerous benefits. In addition to the mentoring that naturally happens, teams improve morale for the members and contribute to a reduction in lawyer turnover.

So it only goes to reason that firms have associates serve as members of client teams. They will learn about the client's business, the firm's relationship with the client and what the client wants from the firm in terms of both services and service. Firms should also include associates on industry teams. In that role they can learn about the industry as well as what resources and qualities the industry values.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Associates today approach the relationship with their law firms very differently than associates did in the past. They are interested in knowing how the firm will help them grow and develop as professionals. They want to play a role in firm activities, from committees to client teams. And they appreciate the economic realities of the practice of law. Firms that provide assistance to young lawyers, by helping them chart and achieve their practice development goals, will benefit greatly in the long run through happier associates, reduced turnover, earlier business development contributions and more satisfied clients.