

Control Your Destiny: Seven Steps for Building a Clientele

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I will never forget one new partner's awakening to the importance of client development. He had worked virtually his entire career on the files of one large financial institution that officed in the same building as his firm. Every day, someone rode up in the elevator with an armful of new transactions requiring his attention. As he described it, it was like there was a machine in the basement producing files. Then he became a partner and was expected to develop his own clientele. Where could he begin?

Based on conversations with lawyers, it seems that a relatively small number in any given law firm actually developed substantial books of business on their own. Some lawyers who appear powerful by virtue of significant client relationships in reality inherited their clients from retiring or transitioning partners. Some lawyers rely on their colleagues to refer the vast majority of their work. Some ride the coattails of great rainmakers. Others have tied their success to the strong reputation of a firm practice area. Still others work for institutional clients who, as our new partner experienced, produce files like virtual machines.

So what's a lawyer to do if suddenly forced to develop a clientele on his or her own?



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Building Your Book of Business: Seven Ideas

It's no secret that in firms large and small, the lawyers with the most significant client relationships usually make the most money and enjoy the most influence in their firms. And the importance of client development only increases for solo practitioners: They cannot *afford* to be complacent about building a clientele, or to rely on others for business.

But beyond the monetary aspects, when you build your own clientele, your practice becomes more enjoyable. You are able to control the kind of work you do, and you gain greater satisfaction interacting with clients because you built those relationships yourself. In essence, you can control your own destiny. Here are seven ideas for doing so.

If you suddenly had to develop a book of business on your own, would you know what to do? Solos and small firm practitioners need tactics different from large firm lawyers. Learn how to take the right steps and you win the rewards of personal client relationships.

"It's better to have one client who thinks you walk on water than ten clients who think you're just okay."

1. Treat every client like your most important client. Someone once said, it's better to have one client who thinks you walk on water than ten clients who think you're just okay. A highly satisfied client will be a wonderful source of positive word-of-mouth and referrals. Return telephone calls within two hours, call clients with status reports before they have to call you, and clearly explain processes and procedures (including billing) before you begin them. Always thank clients for their business.

2. Be visible in the right circles. Large firm clients or referral sources may be likely to run into various firm representatives or read press about institutional activities. But solos and small firms need to build their visibility in targeted ways. You want to see and be seen. Determine where your potential clients and referral sources gather. Attend their industry or professional meetings on a regular basis. Join their social organizations or country clubs. And work yourself into leadership positions.

3. Communicate regularly. Similarly, you need to find positioning activities that don't require a lot of time. One estate planning lawyer moved to a smaller town about 90 miles from her original community. She began sending a personal letter once or twice a year to people with whom she had worked to keep them apprised of both her professional activities and her personal life. It was a very effective way to stay on people's radar screens. Remember: Out of sight, out of mind.

And out of mind means that you won't get the calls when people have legal questions or referrals.

4. Create a team approach. It's extremely important to involve staff members in the delivery of client services. You should consider secretaries and paralegals as integral members of the client service team. Give them training and responsibilities to match, such as informing clients about the status of matters, ensuring top-quality written products and returning phone calls to advise clients of your whereabouts. A good team makes clients feel that the firm is accessible and their matters are under control.

5. Think like an entrepreneur. An entrepreneur is always alert to marketing opportunities. After reading an article, for example, send copies to relevant clients, jot a note to the author or write a letter to the editor. When completing a client project, think of other companies in the same situation that might benefit from your experience. Contact them with helpful information.

6. Find something on which to hang your hat. Many solo and small firm lawyers are general practitioners, or at least have multiple areas of practice. Yet the market wants specialists. In marketing, it is important to focus your message and create perceptions of expertise. So sort through all the things you do and identify the one or two areas that can serve as a "hook" to bring business in the door. Focus your marketing and positioning activities on those areas, and then expand your client relationships once they're in the door.

7. Match the quality of your competitors. One airline learned through research that if passengers had dirty tray tables, they assumed the airline wasn't maintaining its engines. Is that rational? Maybe not. But law firm clients are the same way—at the outset, they don't know how smart you are, but they know if your carpet is worn. Tangibles can create confidence or create skepticism. If clients see your secretary using outdated office machinery, they may assume that you're not up-to-date on legal developments. From your office décor to your business cards, don't skimp on the tangibles.

Being Healthy and Happy

Some people are thrust into solo practice; others go willingly; still others create virtual solo practices within the confines of larger firms. Every lawyer, regardless of firm size, should produce enough business to stay busy and to keep the bottom line healthy. But regardless of your practice situation, developing a clientele that's all your own will be rewarding in more ways than one. ■

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- *Marketing the Law Firm: Business Development Techniques* by Sally J. Schmidt. Law Journal Press, updated semi-annually.
- "Marketing Yourself," Chapter 18 in *The Lawyer's Handbook*, 3rd edition. American Bar Association and Institute of Continuing Legal Education, 1992.
- *The Complete Guide to Marketing Your Law Practice* edited by Hollis Hatfield Weishar and James A. Durham. ABA Law Practice Management Section, 1999.
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