Play to Win

Business Development Starters for Law Firm Associates

By Sally J. Schmidt
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Six business development activities to get your practice off to a running start.

I remember when partners would say to associates, "Don't worry about getting business. Just spend your time doing the work and learning your craft." Then, firms would make someone partner and tell them to build a practice. Without having planted the seeds as an associate, it was an uphill battle at best.

Well, if my experience is representative, those days are gone. While in most law firms, the No. 1 priority for associates is still to become excellent lawyers, many firms are asking their young lawyers to start thinking about marketing and business development earlier in their careers.

I think it's a great idea. At the same time, however, it's important to establish and communicate reasonable expectations. It would be rare for a sixth-year lawyer in white-collar litigation, for example, to have opportunities to generate business, given what's at stake for clients. On the other hand, practices with less money or perceived risk involved, such as estate planning, might present immediate prospects.

That said, today's associates show an incredible desire for practical information on how to build a practice. Regardless of the substantive area involved, there are many things young lawyers can and should do to set the stage for future marketing and business development success.

Associate Business Development Fundamentals

If you implement all six of these activities, your future marketing efforts will be much more productive.

1. Pay attention to your internal marketing efforts.

As an associate, your most likely source of business, of course, is the partners in the firm. Working on matters for a partner's client gives you two vital things:

- Experience, so you have something to market someday to others.
- Exposure to clients, through which you can build your client service skills and relationships.

So treat partners like clients. Practice good client relations skills on them. For example, identify their expectations upfront, keep them apprised of the status of the matter, be responsive, and follow up when the project is completed. In addition, be active in the firm. Show initiative by offering to write for a practice group newsletter, sign up to attend a baseball game with clients, or make a presentation to another department after attending a CLE program. Internal visibility will result in more good work and good marketing opportunities.

2. Manage relationships like they are your most important asset.

I recently met with a partner to discuss his business development efforts and I asked how he tracks his contacts. He showed me a huge stack of business cards in his desk with a rubber band around them, admitting there were many people in that deck whom he cannot recall.

As a young person, you may find it hard to believe but it's true: You think you will remember your contacts, but you will not. You think you will stay in touch with people, but you will not. Not unless you organize and manage them, that is.

Keep track of undergrad and law school friends, former colleagues, contemporaries at client companies or co-counsel firms, experts, friendly opposing counsel, bar contacts and other professional acquaintances. It doesn't matter how you do it — use Excel, Outlook, a notepad or the firm's client relationship management (CRM) database — just do it. This is especially important if you don't like networking and meeting new people. At least you won't lose track of those you already know!

3. Create your own experience database.

As is the case with your contacts, you may think you will recall everything you have worked on, but trust me, you will not. I can't tell you how many partners, when preparing a pitch or for a meeting, will say something like, "I wish I could remember how many of these I have done."

Why is this important? Because a lot of lawyers can say they worked on deals — but how many can cite the number of deals in a particular industry or the aggregate dollars involved? A lot of people can say they have participated in arbitrations — but how many can recall the number of arbitrations or the specific issues involved? Numbers and facts are very compelling to prospective clients.

As an added bonus: If you ever try to get certified in a practice area or elected into a credentialing organization like a "college," you likely will need this information anyway. You can track it however you like but many associates find it helpful to do it in conjunction with their annual self-assessment.

4. Become active in an organization.

Every lawyer needs to be involved in an outside organization and, ultimately, its leadership. Done right, this will:

- Help you meet people and build your network of contacts.
- Allow you to give something back to the profession or the community — which people expect of lawyers.
- Help you build your leadership skills and a reputation as the kind of person who can get things done.

For pure business development, some organizations may be better than others. For young lawyers, however, I am less concerned about what the group is than the lawyer's commitment to it. For example, a seventh-year lawyer with whom I work is a member of a service organization and landed an eminent domain issue when the group's building was targeted by the city.

If you are seeking an organization in which to get involved, your choices are many:

- School-related groups, such as your college or law school alumni association
- Bar association entities, such as the Young Lawyers Division of the ABA or your state bar
- Industry groups, like a local forum for start-up technology companies
- Community or civic groups, such as a library or homeless shelter volunteer group
- Diversity or affinity groups, like the Asian American Bar Association
- Organized activities, like an annual marathon or charity golf tournament
- Social or networking groups, like a breakfast club of young professionals

For your outside activity to be helpful for future business development, you must make a real commitment to it — dive in, attend meetings and get involved. For your contributions to be genuine, you must feel some passion for the organization, its subject or its cause.

5. Show what you know.

Substantive expertise is still a work in progress for most young lawyers. Still, I believe associates should aim to complete one "thought-leadership" activity each year, which could include:

- An article for a newsletter, blog, or website, whether published by the firm or an outside source
- A speech, which could be given at an internal firm meeting (e.g., for a practice group), a firm-sponsored event for clients (like a webinar or seminar), or something sponsored by an outside group (such as the aforementioned organizations)

Opportunities are easier to obtain than you might think. For subject matter, you only need to know more than the reader or audience member. For example, you could track the whistleblower cases in your courts and report on trends over the past five years. Or you could identify a niche within a niche (e.g., M&A issues involving government contractors) in which you have had some experience.

And, don't forget, you can always team with a firm partner, a client, a referral source, or another "authority" if you need more substantive expertise or gravitas. In fact, my very first published article was co-authored with a faculty advisor from my MBA program.

6. Build your platform.

Finally, you need to get comfortable with how you present yourself to people — your personal brand. This takes many forms, including:

- Your "elevator speech" — how you describe what you do (and what the firm does)
- Your firm website bio
- Your LinkedIn profile

Spend time thinking about how to describe your practice. Create different versions for different audiences (e.g., an HOA meeting of neighbors versus a law school reunion). In all cases, focus on the kinds of clients you represent, what you do to help them and ways in which you (or the firm) are different.

Be conscious of your personal brand when you talk with people, whether it's a partner from whom you'd like to obtain more work or someone unrelated to the firm. And keep your brand message up to date. For example, review your firm bio and LinkedIn profile at least twice a year, adding new areas of expertise or interesting new representative cases on which you've worked. Your practice will change and your experiences will grow, so you need to make sure you are always presenting the best version of yourself.

Associate Business Development Building Blocks for the Long Term

Marketing and business development can be frustrating for associates because the return on today's investment is clearly well into the future. However, like the time value of money, the earlier you start, the greater your potential.

Will any of these six steps bring in business? Probably not, at least not in the short term. But each is an essential building block to your future marketing and business development success.

Sally Schmidt, President of Schmidt Marketing, Inc., helps lawyers and law firms grow their practices. She was a founder and the first President of the Legal Marketing Association, is a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management and was one of the first inductees to LMA's Hall of Fame. Known for her practical advice, she is the author of two books, "Marketing the Law Firm: Business Development Techniques" and "Business Development for Lawyers: Strategies for Getting and Keeping Clients." Follow her @SallySchmidt.