

Play to Win

[**Business Development Starters for Associates**](http://www.attorneyatwork.com/business-development-starters-associates/)

By [Sally J. Schmidt](http://www.attorneyatwork.com/author/sally-j-schmidt/) | Jun.25.14 | [Business Development](http://www.attorneyatwork.com/category/business-development/), [Daily Dispatch](http://www.attorneyatwork.com/category/articles/), [Legal Marketing](http://www.attorneyatwork.com/category/legal-marketing-2/), [Play to Win](http://www.attorneyatwork.com/category/play-to-win/)



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 people 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, lately I have conducted a number of associate workshops and found 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. This month and next, I will cover several specific ways associates can get started.

**Three Places to Start**

**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 up front; 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.

**It’s Investing in the Future**

Marketing and business development can be frustrating for associates because the return on today’s investment is clearly sometime well into the future. However, like the time value of money, the earlier you start, the greater your potential. Next month, I will highlight a few more things associates can do today.

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