

Marketing

Being a One-Trick Pony: Developing Collaborative Relationships with Other Firms

SALLY J. SCHMIDT | In reality, many lawyers now serve in substantive specialist roles but they do so in their own firms, as “service lawyers” to rainmakers or generalists. Have you thought about taking this role on the road to develop business by building beneficial alliances with other law firms?

Over the past two years, I have watched a development in the legal profession that seems to be accelerating. More law firms are working closely with other law firms, frequently at the request of clients, to provide the greatest possible level of subject-matter expertise in the most cost-effective manner. The reason: Instead of giving their law firm some latitude to ramp up on a particular area (or, one could say, learn on their dime), clients want their firm to partner with lawyers who are already up to speed on the issues involved. Whether the lawyers or firms are competitors is of no consequence to the client.

In the past, we’ve seen some fairly nonthreatening examples of this, such as intellectual property lawyers from one firm aligning with litigators from

another to handle patent lawsuits. But today the opportunities, and the challenges, appear to be growing.

It might involve a franchise lawyer called in to work with another firm’s attorneys on a case involving distribution issues. An employment lawyer invited to help a general practice firm that’s handling a large class-action matter. A labor lawyer asked to support an M&A practice group in evaluating the effects of union contracts on an acquisition. Or a tax lawyer requested to support a business law firm on structuring a deal.

The merging of the two firms’ expertise can be mutually beneficial. It can help smaller firms provide the “horses” needed to handle a substantial matter for a client. It can position larger firms to provide a particular substantive specialty without adding lawyers. And ultimately, the result is a better work product for the client and more sources of referrals for the lawyers involved.

So unless your firm does everything at an expert level—and no firm, regardless of its size, really does—developing synergistic relationships

with lawyers at other firms can be a very effective marketing strategy. So how do you do it? Developing alliances with lawyers at other firms requires building your reputation in the specialty area and building relationships with potential “partners.”

Building Credibility as a Substantive Expert

When you have an area of expertise that you want other law firms to tap, it is crucial to have a reputation as a subject-matter expert and thought leader. Any number of activities can be effective in building your reputation, including these:

- **Speak to, write for or get active in appropriate bar associations, sections or committees.** If you are an estate planning lawyer, for example, you could focus on the personal injury section of your county bar, letting those lawyers know how you can help their clients with structured settlements.

- **Use social media outlets.** You can write a blog dedicated to your niche or become an aggregator of information on the topic you are marketing. You can use Twitter to communicate developments about cases or rulings in the specialized area to boost your recognition with your audience.

- **Send substantive notices.** You might send e-mails or other types of alerts to targeted lawyers about developments in your area of expertise, including how a new development



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might affect clients in their areas.

■ **Share information about your successes.** You should also keep your targets updated on developments that bolster your reputation, whether it's an induction into a "college" of lawyers, an industry award, a recent good result or another professional achievement.

Remember, whatever forums or activities you employ, your message needs to be focused on the narrow topic you are trying to market to other lawyers, not on everything you do.

Developing Win-Win Alliances

In addition to building credibility in your chosen substantive area, you will need to build relationships with the potential partnering lawyers in order for them to entrust you with their important client relationships. Here are some things to consider in that regard:

■ **Identify the best targets for relationship building.** What kinds of lawyers in your own firm refer this type of work to you? Which other law firms in your region handle related matters or similar clients? And which partners in those firms have handled matters you could support? Employing research and marketing intelligence processes will help you identify the lawyers who may be receptive to your approach.

■ **Learn about their specific needs.** Next, you can take these lawyers out to lunch or meet with them in their offices to talk about how they currently handle issues in your area of expertise. If it seems like you would be a good fit, you should advise them of your interest in working collaboratively, even if that means "behind the scenes."

■ **Add value to the relationship.** You might suggest co-presenting at a bar meeting or co-authoring an article together. You could offer to provide presentations to the target partner's

firm or to specific practice groups. As other examples, you could give your targets opportunities by introducing them to others or inviting them to serve on program panels.

The bottom line is that you need to build a personal relationship—and for a very important reason. These lawyers need to be assured that you can be trusted, not just to provide good advice and good service but also to respect the client relationship.

Additional Words of Advice

Clients understand that lawyers can no longer stay abreast of every development in every area of law. So opportunities to collaborate with other lawyers should be plentiful, as long as you play by the following rules.

■ **Market expertise an inch wide and a mile deep.** You may do more than that one thing for which you are becoming best known (in fact, you may well think yourself or your firm capable of doing what the lead law firm is doing). But remember, your focus for marketing to the potential affiliate lawyers needs to be on the niche area of expertise.

■ **Be clear about your role.** You need to show deference to the lead law firm—and avoid posturing in front of the client. Most important, you need to assure the firm with the client relationship that you will not attempt to expand the business.

■ **Be realistic about opportunities.** Not every lawyer or law firm will be a good target. Some will never want to "share" their clients. Others, whether the partnering arrangement is their idea or the client's, will never give you credit for your contributions. However, clients very much appreciate lawyers who can "play well together in the sandbox" so taking the high road will get you noticed. **LP**

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