

## Building a Great Practice: It's About Relationships

It's no secret that to be a successful attorney, you need to cultivate a steady stream of clients. It's how to do this that often seems like a mystery. Even attorneys who have been successfully practicing for decades often cannot tell you exactly how they find their clients. I know because I asked them. They offered me a version of "If you build it, they will come" as a means of obtaining clients.

But it doesn't exactly work that way. When I first opened my practice over a decade ago—after many years honing my skills in BigLaw—I rented an office, bought legal malpractice insurance, built a website and bought a phone number. I knew I had the knowledge and experience to handle a variety of legal issues, and I naively and incorrectly believed that the clients would find me online and hire me based on my website bio.

A few clients found me via my website, but for the most part these were small matters and not nearly enough to support my law practice. As the weeks began to pass without much progress, I wondered if I would ever find the number and types of clients needed to build a sustainable practice.

So I took action. I emailed and called attorneys whom I knew or had worked with who were still at big law firms and reminded them of my existence and experience. I attended CLEs at the New York City Bar Association and law conferences. I volunteered my time to work with others on CLE programs. I took on pro bono matters to get more time in court and keep my skills fresh. I wrote articles for publications to maintain my research skills and to get my name "out there." My marketing plan at that point in time could be best described as "panic marketing." It was not oriented to a specific goal other than to get more clients. It was scattershot and provided uneven results. And worst of all: It was not fun. Since then, I have learned the secret to attorney marketing that's actually enjoyable: It's all about building relationships. It is not quick. And you cannot predict which specific efforts will lead to the work that you want. It's easier for some to do than others. And it's the reason many experienced attorneys seem to think that new clients just appear out of nowhere. But it is as simple as relationship building. The clients continue to find you because of the relationships that you, experienced counsel, have built up over time. And it helps to have a plan. There is a way to shorten the time frame needed to build these relationships. Here is what I found works for me.

### Expand Your Network of Referral Sources

First, think about who you would want to meet who could refer you to the types of clients that would fit best in your practice. Second, think about where you would be able to meet these referral sources (a bar association committee, a particular industry conference, etc.). Third, be prepared to talk about your practice and experience. Fourth, attend as many of these events as possible. Fifth, follow up! This could be just an email or an in-person meetup.

## Nurture Your Network

For people who are already in your network and may be good referral sources, the key is to continue to nurture those relationships. It helps to maintain a spreadsheet of names and contact information where you can note the last time you connected with each potential source. Each day, you should contact one to five of the people on your list. This list will grow over time.

LinkedIn offers a convenient way to connect and reconnect with those in your network. You should spend a few minutes each day to see if anyone in your network has posted a note that you can interact with. And you should be sure to post any important news about you or your practice area.

## Stay Relevant

Write and publish an article in your practice area at least once or twice per year. Try to find a publication with a substantial readership. Writing an article shows your general interest in and knowledge about the practice area. And it will also provide you with something to talk about with your network and potential network.

Participate in your local legal community. Find at least one bar association or a bar association committee that interests you. Make sure it is one that genuinely interests you, even if you are unsure whether the attorneys who belong to the association or are on the committee are likely to be referral sources. Your interest is important for two main reasons: One, it is always helpful to have a group of attorneys with a shared interest to gripe to. And two, even if they are not direct referral sources, attorneys with similar interests are more likely to refer you to others who may become referral sources.

## Adjust As Necessary

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most of my marketing was in person. I would meet new contacts at live events and existing contacts for a drink or a meal. This method works for me because, as my kids say, I'm something of an "extra-extrovert." (I'll take that as a compliment even if they don't mean it that way.) I'm a person who enjoys meeting new people in person and is not particularly shy.

For most of 2020 and 2021, conferences were held remotely, and many people were working from home and largely unavailable to meet for a drink or a meal. But it remained important for me to continue to nurture and grow my referral relationships. I learned during this time that even if you do not identify as an extra-extrovert, there are other ways to connect with new people and build relationships that do not require you to attend large gatherings.

These options include relying more on LinkedIn and other social media sites. They can be great resources to keep you up to date as to what your network is doing and what they are interested in learning more about. It is also a great way to inform many people about your own successes. Another great option is to schedule video-conference calls with one or two contacts each week. These brief check-ins can help to sustain the relationships even when in-person interaction is not possible.

### Do What You Like

Because I have greatly missed long catch-up conversations over lunch these past few years, I recently started a podcast that provides me with a forum for having these conversations even if we are in different locations. I have found the podcast to be a great way for me to communicate both with my current network and my potential network at the same time. My podcast is focused on highlighting successful female attorneys and discussing how they have found success with their law degrees. The podcast gives me a great way to reconnect with successful people in my network, and it is published to a wide audience, allowing others to get to know my guests and me. Plus, it's fun to do.

It's important to be authentic in whatever method you choose to nurture and grow your network. If you loathe talking shop over lunch, you should not plan to have lunch meetings with potential referral sources. Maybe your preferred method of interaction is to discuss a particular legal issue via text, LinkedIn or Twitter. That's fine. Just find a method for building relationships that you can stick to. You already know that as an attorney, you are not selling widgets. You are selling your own mind and your ability to solve problems. A referral from someone who knows you and appreciates your legal acumen is priceless. The more relationships you build, the greater the chance those relationships will lead to billable work. And remember that real relationships do take a bit of work, but they are the most rewarding.

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