

WAYS TO NETWORK— #5 - #7

WOM

Word of Mouth is going on all around you. The question is: Is what's being said about you good or bad? The best clients usually come as a referral from a former client. It has been my experience that good clients refer good clients and bad clients refer even worse clients. But think about how quickly you are to share a bad experience with anyone that will listen. We do this most frequently when we go out to eat. If the service was slow, the food was cold, the meals were wrong—we tell people. Don't think for a minute that your clients aren't doing the exact same thing about your legal services.

If, on the other hand, you found a way to build your clients into your networking scheme, they will (almost) always be out there handing out your business cards to their friends and family. What if you, as a successful real estate attorney, had a happy client who saw that a "For Sale By Owner" (FSBO) sign went up in their neighbor's yard. Do you think there is money to be made from that FSBO trying to save money by cutting out the middle man, namely, the Realtor? Sure there is! And if your client sold you to the neighbor with some sort of glowing testimonial about how well you took care of them, and how you would still be cheaper than a real estate agent, yet provide them all the legal protections, why wouldn't the FSBO retain your services?

The key to good word of mouth isn't good service: Your clients expect that at \$200+ per hour. What you need is the instant credibility that only a happy client can offer. Your client can be the best walking billboard for your business, so why not do something out of the ordinary for them. Once a year, my law firm would host a summer gala some place for the purposes of bringing clients together and enjoy food and drinks amongst friends. Sure they didn't know each other coming in, but to you think it turned into a "love fest" by the time their host came sauntering through? You bet it did! If you offer an event where you clients feel like they're getting (even a small amount) of their money back through free drinks and food, they'll remember that next time you send them their bill. Plus it keeps you top of mind for the clients who may not currently have an open file with your firm.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many states offer seminars for continued legal (learning) credits through the state bar. This is another great place to network and build your business. "What?" you're asking, "Go to where my competition is? What a waste of time!" Trust me, the pie is too big for any one attorney, they'll share, I promise. First of all, it never hurts to meet someone more seasoned than you who can offer mentoring during those first few years in practice. If you're like me and you're a solo newbie, it's essential that you have someone to bounce ideas off from and see if your legal theory succeeds or stinks.

In the new electronic age we're in with Blackberries, online research websites, and document-management software, younger attorneys can offer something to more experienced attorneys

who might not otherwise have the inclination to learn how it can speed up their business practices. If, in return, that senior attorney were willing to educate the new attorney on motion practice, judge's idiosyncrasies, and court clerk pet-peeves, couldn't both the newer and experienced attorney each gain something from the relationship?

More so, going to these seminars offers you the opportunity to keep up with trends in any given area of law. New court rulings impacting your preferred area of law might have missed your eyes, but meeting other attorneys might expose you to information you otherwise wouldn't have known.

Think you might ever need or want a new job? The attorneys that you meet at these events may have a job position opening next month or know of someone who is hiring. Likewise, those senior attorneys you've been mentoring on how to use Adobe® might be looking to sell their business in 5-10 years and might be looking for someone they know, like and trust to take over their existing clients.

Speaking of clients, do you think more experienced attorneys charge more per hour than do newer attorneys? More so, when a client can't afford the hourly and/or retainer requirement of the seasoned attorney, wouldn't you like to be the person the older lawyer refers that client too? This writer has had a fair number of attorneys pass clients his way when a potential client couldn't afford the \$300+ hourly rate of a more experienced attorney. Or couldn't afford the \$5000 retainer the lawyer required before taking a divorce case. Or when the lawyer from one side of the state and a client on the other side of the state, which happened to be geographically where my office was located.

The point being: Never underestimate the business which can be generated by sitting next to another attorney at a professional development event. Even though they may be your "competition", they might not be under many circumstances. Building a working relationship with them can do wonders for your business.

MASS MAILING

Mass mailings can be a tricky endeavor for an attorney. First of all, you have to worry about potential unethical behavior and violating your state's rules of professional conduct. However, assuming that you're mailing out information pieces to a broad audience, it's not likely you'll get yourself into too much trouble. That said: Always consult with your state bar's ethics department when in doubt.

The other reason why mass mailings can be so tricky is because they only average a 7% return on investment. This means, simply mailing out 100 pieces of mail will net you 7 phone calls of follow up from your recipients. From there, you shouldn't expect to garner much more than 40%-50% of closed business from those calls. Pretty dismal, isn't it?

The purpose of mass mailings isn't so much to sell yourself or your services, as much as it is to keep yourself top of mind. If you even get enough immediate business to recoup your out of pocket expenses for the mailing you should be thrilled. The main reason an attorney wants to doing periodic mailings is to build name recognition (just like the personal injury attorney and their commercials) so that if/when they do need your services, your mailing will hit their mailbox again and they'll feel as though they already know you...at least enough to call your office and set-up an appointment to meet you.

On a much smaller, individualized scale, sending out a card from time to time will net you far more business in the long run. Send an article to a client or business referral source if it has something to do with their business, favorite activity, charity, etc. Likewise, if you see an article in the newspaper about your client and one of your referral sources, make sure to cut it out and mail it to them with a note of congratulations. Your recipient will be touched that you took the time to mail her the note and a copy of the article (in the highly unlikely event they missed it themselves). It should go without saying: Always mail a birthday, anniversary, condolence card when appropriate. A small gesture like this can go a long way to making that person want to come back to you and pass your name on to someone who needs your services.

COLD CALLING

Just for the record: THIS IS NOT NETWORKING! While you certainly will meet more people this way, you will get barely 1%-2% of your new business this way. This is an absolutely awful way to meet new people and I couldn't dissuade you more from implementing this.

Look, nobody likes to be sold too, they want to buy. Well guess what, if I needed your product/service, I'd have found you—leave me alone! But for those of you not as jaded as I, you may not mind getting or receiving these types of phone calls. If you're one of the masochists that like to make cold calls, have at it. Just make sure you're double-checking with your state bar's ethic division to ensure you're not committing malpractice.

If you're going to cold call, allow me to offer some pointers to make it moderately worth your time. First of all, cold call attorneys in your area, but find a hook to make them want to speak with you. What to know what that hook is? Offer to do something for them. Listen, they're busy, busier than you are. Offer to take them to lunch to find out what advice starting out they wished they had. If they've written an article for the county or state bar journal, ask them to meet with you to find out what else they wanted to put in the article but didn't have room (or time) to include. Ask if they ever find themselves stuck in two different courts on either side of the state, you would be willing to help cover for them, if for no other reason than to get an adjournment—at no cost to them.

You need to give them something to make them want to spend time with you. Remember, every hour they are meeting with you is a missed billable hour they could have earned. Once

they see your willingness to offer them something, at no cost, they won't mind taking your cold call.

Equally, cold call professions within your contact sphere. As we've alluded to but never explained, a contact sphere is a group of businesses that meet for the purposes of passing clients to one another but those professions never compete with the other. For example, if you're a business law attorney, I hope you regularly meet with a business consultant, a banker, an office supplier, Chamber of Commerce representative and a debt collection company. None of these businesses conflict with your business, to the contrary, they compliment your profession. If you were to cold call them and ask them to lunch because you believe you have referrals to pass to them, they would be nuts not to take you up on your offer. For you, the only risk you face is that they have a pre-existing relationship with a business attorney and you're out \$8 for their lunch.

But, if that other attorney ever drops the ball with your prospective business source, don't you want to be top of mind for whom they need to pass their business clients? You never know when another attorney is going to bungle a client and sever the business relationship with the other person. This about this: Whenever you pass a referral, aren't you really passing a small piece of your credibility? As an estate planner, if I refer my best client to the reverse mortgage specialist and he drops the ball, doesn't my credibility take a hit in the eyes of my client? The same is true for any profession. You may not land that referral source the first time you go out to lunch, but if he becomes disillusioned by his existing attorney relationship, wouldn't you want your business card in his Rolodex?

There is a start as to how best to cold call, if you must. From there, grab a phonebook, buy a computer generated specialized list of potential clients and knock yourself out. Personally, I would rather eat Ramen noodles before resulting to making cold calls to people who do not want to hear from me.