

Business Development Advice from Rainmaker Pamela J. Roberts

By Larry Bodine, a business development advisor with Apollo Business Development. He has helped law firms nationwide attract new clients and generate new business by using strategy, business development training and individual attorney coaching. See www.ApolloBusinessDevelopment.com. He can be reached at 630.942.0977 and Lbodine@LawMarketing.com.



Larry Bodine

Pamela Roberts, Esq., a partner at Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough, has cracked the code to becoming a rainmaker: get active in a big national organization, focus on public service and let the referrals come in. Her story illustrates how any lawyer can do the same; and her questions at the end of the article can stimulate your own success story.

She is no ordinary lawyer. Roberts is the Chair of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, a prominent national position that gives her frequent exposure on the wide range of issues facing women lawyers. And she does it while being a mother of four, wife of another partner in her firm and full-time business litigator at a 400-lawyer firm.

Only 17% of women lawyers are equity partners, and most firms have just a lone woman rainmaker – statistics that Roberts finds distressing. “Becoming a rainmaker always been somewhat challenging. It’s so much more challenging for a woman,” she said.

But she herself is active in four local charities, which brought her referrals. She is a regular public speaker before audiences of clients, and she attends trade association meetings in the industries of her clients.

How does she do it all? “I gave up on sleep,” she joked. “Seriously, my husband and I made the decision that by having two people working full time, we have to pay for nannies and support help.” Help is essential, especially when one of your kids is on two traveling soccer teams.

Getting Business from the Bar (or other Organizations)

And so is focus. Roberts pursues activities and passions where she can build relationships. For her it’s been the American Bar Association, where she began more than a decade ago by working her way up the Litigation Section. Her husband gave her an early demonstration of networking.

“I was attending an ABA Litigation section meeting. My husband, who is also a lawyer and avid golfer, was with me and he went out for a round of golf. He came back to lunch with another couple: one, a potential client whom he had been golfing with, and his spouse, who was a litigator attending the ABA meeting. She and I had never spoken though it’s only a group of 200 people! Meanwhile, these two guys played one round of golf and had already exchanged business cards and followed up with notes to each other,” she said.

Roberts devoted herself to the ABA and today is a member of the ABA House of Delegates, the ruling legislative body. She served on the Board of Governors – the ABA’s board of directors – from 2002-2005, and is a former member of the commission on what is today named the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession. She was Chair of the Young Lawyers Division and served on the ABA’s Nominating Committee and Special Committee on Governance.

She was following a key rule of business development: to join an organization and become *visible in it*. “My continuing motive always has been the underlying work,” she said. “I’ve always been a believer in the public service aspect of the ABA.” At the same time she started seeing immediate business benefits, because South Carolina is a small state and lawyers around the country would refer local legal matters to her. “I’m not aggressive about business development in the ABA,” she said. “But certainly, yes, the ABA is a good arena to get referrals. Just like golf or trade association activity, once you’ve worked together with other lawyers you can build relationships.”

To achieve her success, she advises other lawyers: “You must treat bar association membership as you would treat a client: honor deadlines and respect other people’s time and input. It is not only rewarding, but you’ll succeed and will be around a long time and get the opportunities.”

Roberts uses several specific techniques to generate new business:

- **Speaking engagements.** “A speech is absolutely a business development opportunity,” she said. “Sometimes it doesn’t even matter what you’re speaking on.” She said it impresses clients if they merely see their lawyer on a panel discussion at an industry event. “The ideal setting is when a client is in the audience and you’re speaking on something important that directly affects the client.”
- **Niche building.** The bane of litigators is one-time engagements. Lawyers typically will work with a client on litigation for years, but when the case concludes, so does the relationship. To overcome this problem, Roberts built a niche practice to offer the same service to multiple clients. “I did a lot of securities fraud class action defense work. A lot of them were one-time cases. What I did was parlay my expertise so it worked for other clients. I can say to one client that I did this particular work for two others. That’s how you build a type of expertise into a niche practice,” she said.
- **Referrals from civic boards of directors.** Roberts is on the board of the Trinity Housing Corporation, Claflin College, the local YMCA and the local children’s museum. “All four of them are outside the legal profession. They clearly introduced me to civic leaders and opportunities to talk about what our firm did. Those opportunities also led me to meet decision-makers of current clients. Board membership is a great way to solidify both the firm’s relationship and build my own expertise,” she said.

Rainmaking is the key to breaking the glass ceiling that stops women from moving up in law firms. See the other feature articles this month on the same theme. Lawyers who want to smash through the barrier should emulate Roberts' example, starting with her

Thirteen Questions to Help Yourself Succeed in Growing a Practice

[As presented at the Second Annual Women in Law Leadership Academy]

1. What do you best like to do that might attract clients and how does that fit in with your practice area?

- Community activities
- Speaking
- Bar activities
- Social activities
- Teaching
- Alumni groups
- CLE
- Politics

2. What areas of practice are growing and likely to need lawyers?

- Does your practice have a niche?
- Are you a generalist or a specialist?
- What events would make your practice grow?

3. How do other lawyers attract clients?

- Look at whom you admire in your community. Call and ask them how they attracted clients.

- Look at how it is done successfully in your firm and see whether that is feasible for you.

- Law practice management literature on client development

- Referring counsel

- 4. How do you best market yourself to potential clients? What type of name recognition do you need?

- Participation in conferences in your practice area

- Community involvement

- Traditional public relations and marketing

- Teaching

- Writing
- 5. What kind of literature is there on your area of practice? Should you write to raise your profile in your area of practice? Is there “missing” literature on a new case or new area of the law?
- 6. Do you have a network of people who will help you attract business?
- Section of your state or local bar association
- Existing clients
- Can your firm help you?
- “Branding” the firm name? How does your firm become known in a particular practice area?
- 7. Have you written down a short term plan, i.e., how many people you will visit or take to dinner in the next three (3) months? How about a long term plan?
- Target a market
- Don’t be afraid to ask for business
- Team up with one or more people in your firm to pitch clients
- 8. Do you have a mentor or someone who will help you develop business?
- “Pick” someone in the generation before you to help you
- Have a friend or colleague you can talk to or do “beauty contests” with?
- 9. Do your “lifetime” connections help?
- Friends, family, college, law school
- If you don’t have roots in your community, figure out what you need to join to put down roots and become known to potential clients
- 10. Do you reassess every year where you want to be in five (5) years and re-adjust your goals accordingly?
- One set of goals age 25-30; another set from 30 to 40!
- Is partnership a goal? If so, what do you need to do to achieve partnership?
- How to balance with family?

- Bar or community leadership
 - 11. Have you focused on attainable goals?
 - Pick something you can accomplish, i.e., go to a conference, or take someone to lunch or dinner once a week.
 - If you try to spread yourself over too many practice areas or have too broad an objective, you don't find a niche where people will remember you.
 - What kind of image do potential clients have of you? Appearance counts. You want to have your own style of dress – gone are the days of those “bow-tie” blouses.
 - 12. Are you too shy about your accomplishments?
 - Too many women are too self-deprecating; don't be afraid to “toot” your own horn.
 - Tell your firm when you accomplish something in your community.
 - 13. What kind of financial support do you need to accomplish short and long term goals?
 - Client development budget
 - CLE budget
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For more on this topic, call:

Larry Bodine, Esq.

Business Development Advisor

Tel: 630.942.0977

E-mail: Lbodine@LawMarketing.com

Web: <http://www.LarryBodine.com>

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