

Successful Rainmakers Stay the Course

By Kimberly Alford Rice

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Taking proactive and consistent steps to build and strengthen professional relationships is imperative to developing a solid practice. In fact, research teaches us that in order to even appear on prospects' mental radar, one must make contact with them at least 7-10 times in a calendar year. Yet when some lawyers sense they are not yielding the results they expect, they often become frustrated and simply give up. To that I say: "stay the course!"

One of the distinguishing characteristics between lawyers who become frustrated and give up on their client development activities and successful rainmakers is committing to stay the course despite lackluster short-term gains. We all intellectually understand that there is no substitute or short cut to building solid professional relationships than thoughtful efforts targeted to getting in front of qualified prospects on a regular and consistent basis over a certain amount of time. Despite that simple truth, lawyers (especially those who do not have and/or execute an integrated marketing plan) frequently employ a gunshot approach which renders few or no meaningful results.

Though I am not the biggest of sports fans, I do know that in baseball if a batter hits 30 home runs in a full season of about 500-600 at bats, he will most likely be named an All Star and receive a hefty salary increase. For a professional baseball homerun hitter, therefore, success may only occur 5% of the time at bat. Likewise, to implement a focused approach to building professional relationships which are likely to result in increased client retentions, you must be prepared to strike out on occasion. Do not be dissuaded.

Successful rainmakers understand this concept thoroughly and embrace it. They build relationships constantly with clients, referral sources, and prospects by being helpful to others, by making connections, for others and other means in recognition that to build a relationship is to stay top of mind when business and legal issues arise.

They also know that generating work means taking calculated risks and that only 20% of their activity will yield direct results. They also know that while it is critical to be strategic about where to invest their time and energy, it is impossible to know in advance which of the 80% of their activity will not be fruitful.

In many ways, direct rejection is easiest to accept. “Our company has decided to hire firm Y because they have more experience handling securities fraud” does not leave much room for ambiguity. You will not be retained. However, you can leave the door open for other types of work (e.g. perhaps the client will retain your services when they have matters in which you do have extensive experience); but it’s clear when you receive this feedback, it is time to move on.

Another matter altogether, though, is the unanswered phone call or email. This is much more challenging and presents some of the greatest obstacles for lawyers working diligently to build a practice. As we all struggle to effectively manage our communications, everyone has a preference in how they want to communicate. In light of that and the sheer volume, many folks simply do not respond or even acknowledge all of their messages.

It is frustrating when someone does not respond to a message that we have sent via e-mail, left on voice mail or with a secretary. It looks like rejection. When two or three messages go unanswered, most will give up. To save our bruised egos any further indignity, we simply stop trying. However, to do so, we leave opportunity on the table.

Here is the good news: Silence is not ‘no’; it can merely be the temporary absence of ‘yes’.

Until a prospect tells you directly that she or he is not interested, you have no idea why they are not responding; and if the individual is someone with whom you really want to do business, you should keep trying.

Using a “multimedia” approach can also be helpful (send an e-mail first, then call and leave voice mail followed by checking with a secretary third and then possibly even send a letter – mix up your approach). Be sure your targeted prospects are on your frequent contact list to receive articles and updates, etc.

In some ways, it is vain to perceive that a lack of response has anything to do with you. There are many reasons why someone may not return your call, respond to your email or other communication. Coaching lawyers over many years, I have heard countless anecdotes along the theme “I met this potential client nearly 2 years ago, hadn’t connected in months and out of the blue, I receive a call that he has a matter he wants me to handle.” Who hasn’t experienced or at least heard a similar story?

In most cases, my clients were eventually retained and the new clients apologized for being so unavailable for a time. In these scenarios, the potential clients’ unresponsiveness had nothing to do with my clients and they would have forfeited a new client had they not persisted.

The bottom line is this: Building a healthy practice requires you to forge on despite immediate circumstances. If you have a strategic plan of action, are targeting qualified prospects in a meaningful way in a consistent and persistent manner, you will ultimately develop the business you are working for and your professional satisfaction will grow as a result of it.