

THE BEST WAY TO CATCH NEW CLIENTS? FIND THEIR ASSOCIATIONS AND GET ACTIVELY INVOLVED

by John Remsen, Jr.

Generally speaking, I find that many (maybe even most) younger attorneys I meet – say those born after 1960 - are willing and, in many cases, eager to “market.” They realize that marketing and business development are part and parcel of being a successful lawyer and essential to operating a successful law firm.

In most law firms, existing client relationships tend to be controlled by more senior lawyers. That means that junior lawyers must go outside the firm to find clients and build their books of business. And we all know, it’s just not that easy.

Studies tell us that it takes 8-11 “impressions” to convert a prospect to a client. On top of that, it takes 5-7 times more time, effort and energy to generate a new matter from a new client than from an existing one. Needless to say, finding new clients takes time (non-billable), commitment and perseverance.

So what should a young lawyer who wants to build a book of business do in order to create these 8-11 impressions? Where is the best place to invest that precious time, effort and energy?

To use a fishing analogy, you’ve got to first figure out what kind of fish you want to catch and then hang out where they do. The “fish,” of course, are the prospective clients. The place they hang out — the “reef,” if you will -- is their association. It’s where they go to be with others like them. It’s where they learn and keep abreast of industry trends. And you need to be there...one of the fish, part of the school, actively involved and, one day, leading the way.

When it comes to organizational involvement, most lawyers join and seldom go. Or they pick the wrong organization for marketing and business development purposes. This article counts down our top ten recommendations to maximize your ROI from involvement in associations.

#10) Stay Out of The Bars

Your parents always said that hanging out in bars can only lead to trouble. And, from a marketing and business development perspective, spending lots of time in bar associations is probably not the best place to meet and build relationships with prospective clients. Alas, many lawyers find comfort here among other lawyers and they call it “marketing.” But I’m going to suggest that you find somewhere else to go.

#9) Figure Out What You Want to Catch

Here we are back to that fishing analogy. But it proves my point. The more clearly and narrowly you define your target audience – the kinds of clients you want - the more effective your marketing and business development efforts will be. Let me repeat that. The more clearly and narrowly you define your target audience, the more effective your marketing and business development efforts will be.

This is half the battle for most lawyers and law firms. They tend to want to be all things to all people and they try to market every tiny little thing they do. But if you spread your marketing time and dollars too thin, you wind up catching nothing. Another important consideration: Market what you *want*, not what you *do*.

#8) Think Industry, Not Area of Law

Most lawyers and law firms like to market their areas of law, such as corporate, tax, environmental or litigation. Clients, on the other hand, look for lawyers and law firms with knowledge and experience in their industries, such as construction, entertainment, transportation and health care. There is a growing body of research that supports this most important distinction.

The moral of the story: Market to an industry, not your area of law. That suggests that you should get involved in an industry trade association. Many law firms, following the lead of banks and CPA firms, have taken the next logical step and created Industry Practice Groups.

#7) Do Your Research and Develop a Short List

There are associations for just about everything. And if you live in a large metropolitan area or state capital, chances are you can find a number of organizations to consider. For example, if you are a banking lawyer, check out your state Bankers Association. If you are a female real estate lawyer, take a look at an organization called Commercial Real Estate Women (CREW).

Do some online research. Talk to clients and prospective clients about the organizations to which they belong. Check out these organizations' websites. Take a look at the Board of Directors. What about the rank and file members? Are they decision makers? Can they hire or influence the decision to hire lawyers? Talk to a Board member about upcoming meetings and opportunities for you and your firm to get involved. Find out what other lawyers or law firms are involved. You are looking for a target rich environment where you will have the opportunity to get involved. Do your homework and develop a short list of organizations to consider.

#6) Pick One and Go Deep

Next, go to a meeting or two of each group you have identified. Ask one of your clients if you can go to an upcoming meeting as a guest. This is the time to conduct some due diligence, because once you find the right organization, you must become active and invest lots of time there to make it pay off.

Although there is nothing wrong with the Chamber of Commerce or the United Way, these groups cross industry lines. They are too diverse and their memberships are typically too fragmented. I submit that you'll find a more target rich environment if you stick with an industry trade association.

My advice is to find the right group – just one - and go deep. That will be far more effective than peripheral involvement in three or four organizations.

Finally, if the organization you seek isn't out there, start it. That's what we've done with the Managing Partner Forum (www.ManagingPartnerForum.org) and we've worked with many law firms to create similar opportunities.

#5) Jump in With Both Feet

Once you've found the right organization, you've got to get actively involved. And, frankly, this is where most lawyers and law firms fall down. They join and then never go. Too busy. Kid's softball game. Conflicts. Whatever.

Well, guess what? Getting meaningful results through organizational involvement is like joining the gym. If you want results, you have to go and you have to exercise. You've got to make it a top priority. You get involved by going to monthly meetings. And you go religiously. You start to meet people. You develop friendships.

If you are into social media, add your new contacts to your LinkedIn, JD Supra (and other appropriate online media) groups.

Remember those 8-11 impressions? Here's where they start to happen fast and, in time, it will start to pay off. It's an investment in you. Make it part of your routine. A little bit every week.

#4) Join a Committee and Perform

Early on, you should join a Committee and I often suggest the Program or Membership Committee. Both tend to be active and visible within the organization and will afford you the opportunity to meet lots of people. Once you've selected your Committee, volunteer to lead a highly visible project and perform like crazy. Do what you say. Meet deadlines. Exceed expectations. Do a great job and people will notice.

Remember those 8-11 impressions? Here's where they start to happen really, really fast...and it all happens very naturally.

#3) Throw Some Money At Them

Ask the firm to sponsor a meeting or two, or run an ad in the membership directory. Make an impact with your dollars and resist the temptation to spread them too thin. For example, it is far more effective to pick one high profile annual event and "own it" as the primary sponsor, rather than being one of three dozen bronze sponsors for a multitude of events throughout the year.

#2) Befriend Future Leaders

Make it a point to befriend key leaders (both current and future) of the organization. Seek them out at meetings. Set up a breakfast or lunch meeting twice a month with selected Board members and Committee Chairs. Do some research ahead of time and ask questions about their company, its plans for the future and their role in the organization. Get to know them on a personal level. Be sincere and, by all means, don't ask for business too soon. You've got to build trust and that takes time....it takes 8-11 impressions.

#1) Achieve a Leadership Position

In time, you should seek to Chair a Committee. In most organizations, this can be realistically achieved within two years. A year or so later, you are likely to find yourself in a position to run for a seat on the Board of Directors. I guarantee that you can become President of almost any organization you want within five years if you set your sights on the prize and go for it. It's not hard. It just takes time, commitment and perseverance,

As you climb within the organization, seek opportunities for you (or your colleagues at the firm) to participate in programs and contribute articles to the newsletter or website on a regular basis. Talk to the Program Chair and the Newsletter Editor about your interest in helping them put on good programs and provide timely and relevant articles for the members. Chances are you will be pleased by the responses you get. Find out what they need and help them get it.

Conclusion

If you find the right organization and do the things we've set forth in this article, it won't be too long before you and your firm are recognized as can-do people who know and understand the concerns and issues facing the industry. Along the way, you will have developed relationships with persons in a position to hire or refer you. It doesn't get much better than that.

But it takes time, commitment and perseverance. Get out there. Get active. Start today.

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About the Author



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