Law Firm Marketing

BY GARY MITCHELL; MANAGING DIRECTOR, GEM COMMUNICATIONS INC.

Start client development early on

It is never too early to start cultivating client development skills. In this column I will outline the steps junior associates can be taking in the early stages of their careers to set them on the right path and alleviate some of the pressure that they will encounter as they approach the partnership track.

As a preface it's important to understand that I approach client development by pointing to four stages: Find, Build, Discover and Offer. The first stage, Find, is all about finding people who need your services and/or making it easier for them to find you. You will always be looking to support this stage; however it is most important early on. As a junior lawyer you don't yet have the profile or experience to focus on Discover or Offer but you do have the opportunity to start meeting people and building relationships with them.

So in your first one-to-three years of working in the legal field you will want to focus on delivering your service, observing more senior lawyers and gathering intelligence.

So the actions you will want to take include: Observe. Observe. Observe. Watch the seniors and partners deliver service. Start to notice which styles you are aligned with; which ones come naturally to you; which ones you enjoy etc. Ask questions if you don't understand.

While you're learning the substantive skills required to do your job, remember to ask what the client objective is in each matter. Develop the habit of understanding there are two relationships to build: One with the client and one with the file.

As you become aware of the client intelligence you're gathering, find a place to record it so it is retrievable and meaningful. Do not rely on your memory. This will become very valuable later in your career. Attend all firm-sponsored training sessions on client service, development and relationship building.

Establish a profile on general social networking sites such as Facebook (if you haven't already) to keep in touch with law school classmates, college friends etc. The purpose of building a profile online is to maintain personal connections that could be meaningful to you later on. At some point these relationships will be moving towards potential business and at that time you can move some of your contacts over to LinkedIn, a business oriented social networking site. I am a fan of keeping friend contacts on Facebook and more professional connections on LinkedIn.

As appeared in the March 5th 2010 issue of Lawyers Weekly

Start to notice how others develop business. Find a style you are aligned with and observe it. This means becoming proactive and going to more senior lawyers at your firm and asking them to take you out on business development meetings. Ask questions. If you can't attend a business development meeting personally, ask for a summary after the fact. Leverage these opportunities as learning moments.

The next major stage happens in years three to five. This period is all about building relationships, leveraging those relationships and conducting extensive market intelligence.

Here the actions required include: Create a contact list and keep it updated. Who goes on it? Your law school classmates, college friends, etc. Don't forget about other professionals you meet (other lawyers, accountants, bankers etc.) and clients you're working with.

Begin moving your contacts from Find to Build. Get to know contacts and the kind of career they're building for themselves. Be genuinely interested in them. Make notes and keep track of those who are likely to be of value to you as you progress in your career.

Market Research: Get to know your firm's library staff. Ask staff to help you find publications that target the industries you're interested in. Then start following them regularly to become familiar with the issues of the day.

Ask the clients that currently represent the types of files and clients that you want to attract: what professional trade associations they belong to? What are the organizations that target the industries you are interested in? If you're not sure yet if you want to commit to a membership, try the organization on for size first by attending a few events as a guest.

Similarly, ask them: what they read and why? What would be valuable for them to read? Then approach those publications with ideas for articles. Editors are on a constant lookout for new material or new angles on the issues of the day.

As you become more comfortable at events and with content or legal knowledge, approach those same organizations and publications to contribute. Get on boards or committees.

Volunteer to author or co-author a bulletin for your area or practice group. Some of the senior lawyers at your firm might be interested in co-authoring because it saves them time and helps them to continue building their own profiles.

And as you go through your career, understand that client development begins with service. So everything you do and how you communicate with your clients should be treated as such. It is all marketing. If you follow the steps outlined in this article, by the time you are on the partner track you will be so far ahead of where you would have been had you not. It's all about relationships so you can't start finding and building them too early.

Gary Mitchell
GEM Communications Inc.
Suite 675
142-757 West Hastings St.
Vancouver, BC
V6C 1A1
(604) 669-5235
www.gemcommunications.ca