

Unlocking the Potential in Your Practice (New or Old)

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Helena has been a lawyer for 25 years but she just returned to law practice, having been detoured by the births of two children, a divorce and a stint as the president of a small business. She recently joined a boutique trust and estates law firm and needed to develop her own clientele. Even worse, the partner who owned her firm was too insecure to introduce her to his contacts and clients. He even limited her assignments with those clients.

This is a true story, with minor changes to protect Helena's identity. And it exemplifies the situation of thousands of lawyers who leave law practice, but return later and need to build their client base from scratch. Or those who pick up and move to a new location or new office, leaving their local clients behind. Or even those who want to transform their current practice for the better.

The good news is that it can be done; the better news is that opening the potential of your practice can take just a simple key and a few doors to unlock.

The Key to Happiness

How should she begin? To that end, I asked her two questions.

What kind of people do you like as clients?



"You mean, who's my ideal client?" she reacted with uncertainty. She hadn't thought about that before. Weren't all clients equally good, if you had none? After some thought, she realized that she enjoyed entrepreneurial business owners who were risk-takers like herself, and older women who felt relaxed around her and enjoyed her company.

What kind of law do you like to practice?

She quickly reeled off several flavors of estate planning, adding that she was

Preparing Yourself to Originate!

- When starting or restarting a practice, don't aim randomly. Focus!
- Start by asking yourself two key questions: what clients do you want and what kind of law you want to practice.
- Don't go it alone; find allies and build connections. Take the lead to maximize the benefit.
- Budget the time for business development so it fits with your other responsibilities, but also so it gets done.
- Build relationships face-to-face. Other forms of contact can only supplement that.
- Take your greatest distinctions into battle; ask yourself (and others) what you're especially good at.

the only litigator in her firm. Pausing, she added that she liked to set up charities, and enjoyed the idea of being paid for doing good works.

These two questions form the preliminary thought-process that is essential for successful business development. Most lawyers' careers are composed of clients who were assigned to them by a senior partner, or some file that came in over the transom. As a result, many lawyers are unhappy with their practices, because they represent clients that they dislike (polluters, paycheck loan companies, heartless landlords), doing work that disgusts them for people they can't stand. Even among the average array of clients, most lawyers would prefer to jettison their irritating ones. A lawyer stuck with too much of a bad thing will have *no* interest in getting more of the same through business development.

These unhappy lawyers had been picked *by the client*. Instead, smart lawyers *choose their ideal clients*. It begins by visualizing their ideal clients: people who inspire them or whom they admire or whom they just feel comfortable with; companies they feel good about representing; and legal work that they are particularly good at or enjoy. Choosing their ideal clients means taking action to get more of them.

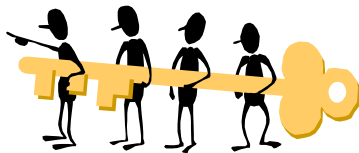
Think about it...if you have clients you like and work you enjoy – you have a great job. Business development becomes the key to happiness.

Turning the Key with Referral Sources and Allies

Helena understood that a lawyer can't be all things to all people. Now, however, she had a strong set of filters in place to choose which clients *she* wanted.

For starters, I recommended that she position herself in her firm as the go-to litigator. This constituted her unique value within the firm. But she needed to activate this by discovering from her partners what matters and clients her skills could benefit, offering to handle every dispute that was going to a hearing, for example. And she needed to work actively alongside her peers to close such opportunities.

Her next step was to examine her list of referral sources. She lived in a wealthy suburb and was friends with a vice-president of an investment firm, a personal injury lawyer, a law professor, the executive director of a healthcare association, and a financial analyst for a stockbroker. Each of them had sent her a client in the past.



I explained that she needed to revive all these relationships in person. Relationships are built face-to-face, not via phone, fax or email. She protested that she had two kids to look after and didn't have a lot of free time. I told that that she still had breakfast and lunch free to meet people during working hours, and could schedule the occasional dinner meeting or weekend coffee. The kids were old enough to understand that Mom has to work. The trick was to take business development and weave it into the activities she was already doing.

When she realized that all her referral sources were women, together we hatched a plan for her to gather them into a woman lawyer's referral network, getting all her contacts together for regular business development meetings. None of the businesswomen in the group competed with another, and certainly they all would have business development ideas to share. I reminded Helena that she had to be the leader – choose the date, follow up with her referral sources to make sure they came, moderate the discussion, make certain the group met on a regular basis, even pick the location. She said she was up to the task.

Working with allies – inside and outside the firm – is a mainstay business development technique. Consider the case of Jennifer Zimmerman of Rhoads & Sinon, a 50+ attorney firm located in Harrisburg, PA., who was named an Associate Marketing All Star. (See http://pm.typepad.com/associatemarketing/2006/01/meet_jennifer_z.html). She forged an alliance with a woman friend who worked at a financial planning firm (as well as a woman partner at her firm). The two young women didn't compete but were pursuing the same business clients. They presented programs together, introduced each other to prospective clients and built each other's practices – efficiently and effectively.

Helena was now very upbeat about developing business for herself. She understood her keys to happiness and was comfortable with what she had to do. Despite the obstacles she still faced – starting from scratch, having no clients and being a busy single mother – she was eager to get started. “It would be great to land just one client before the end of the year,” she said enthusiastically.

I assured her, with a high degree of confidence, that she would be more than pleased by year's end. She would definitely land *several* clients.

For more on this topic, call:
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