

How to Develop New Business without being a Predator

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Many lawyers are reluctant to:

- Impose on social relationships or friends, because feel they're taking advantage of a personal relationship.
- Don't want to appear to "hit on" someone for the sole reason of calling them for new business.
- Feel reluctance to discuss business with referral sources they know from free-time activities – like being on a volleyball team with architects or knowing executives from a bicycling club.
- Talk about business, discover a need, but don't know how to close.

You may know dozens of people who belong to groups, clubs, committees and volunteer activities with you -- but they don't send you work. Or you may find that after years of working through lunch, your business network is pretty small. It's time to learn to transform existing relationships into new business.

As a lawyer, you are trained that "real work" come first and that you must meet your billable hour target. Consequently, your circle of business contacts may be very small, and probably limited to the lawyers in your firm and your current clients. You know that new business comes via personal relationships, but you have a small network.

On the other hand, you may be a lawyer who goes to all the bar association meetings, is active in the community, is a Boy Scout Cubmaster, is a volunteer on a charity, serves as an elected official and belongs to service clubs. But for some reason, all this activity doesn't turn into new files. It seems that all the other lawyers get the work. You need to expand these relationships so that they generate new business.

By adopting a "helping" attitude, an awkward situation is easily transformed without taking advantage of people or imposing on relationships. You're not a "greedy lawyer looking to line his pockets" when you ask to a friend about his career or company. We're all grown-ups, and work is a fair topic of discussion. When you ask questions, you may find an opportunity to help your colleague with legal services. (If not, that just means the person isn't a buyer – today.) Building relationships that generate new business draws on your ability to ask questions that get the other person talking -- not pushy salesmanship or overbearing behavior.

Reluctance to ask a friend for business typically boils down to a concern that by mixing business with friendship, it will spoil the friendship. You might worry that your friend will think you're "exploiting" the relationship and will take offense. Or, you could be concerned that a poor result will destroy the relationship. Or that you'll feel resentful if the person doesn't hire you.

The remedy for this dilemma is two-fold and found half in mindset and half in tactics. Before deleting your friends from your prospect list, consider the truth of the following mindsets:

1. Your friend has a real problem (people hire lawyers when they have problems; nobody hires them just for fun). Who better to help solve that problem than you? After all, you have a vested interest in your friend's welfare.
2. If your friend is in a position to hire legal counsel, they are a sophisticated businessperson. Sophisticated businesspeople know that others need to sell their services (they probably "sell" more than you do). They won't be offended by your approach. In fact, they may wonder why you waited this long to talk about it.
3. You are a very competent lawyer. What's the likelihood that something will go so wrong as to destroy the friendship? Have you considered that this might deepen your friendship? Your friend will get to see another dimension of you-- in an area where you shine. Besides, working with friends can be fun.
4. If the friend doesn't hire you, it's because they don't have a need for your services at this time or is unable to hire you. It doesn't mean that they won't hire you in the future or that they don't respect you as a professional.

Once you get the right mindset, instead of trying to interject business into your weekend jog together, here's a question you might ask:

"Elizabeth, I would like to talk about the possibility of our doing business together, but I don't want it to impinge on our friendship. Could I come to your office on Tuesday and discuss your legal needs and see if there is an area in which my firm or I might be able to help you?"

This approach has several advantages:

- It clearly acknowledges that you value the friendship and do not want to jeopardize it.
- It lets the friend know you recognize the boundaries between friendship and business and makes it clear that you do not intend to convert your "friend time" into an endless barrage of sales pitches.
- It puts you on a businessperson-to-businessperson footing when talking business.

With the right mindset and approach, doing business with friends can be fun and profitable.



For more on this topic, call:

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