

Job hunting in the current economy: It's a “brand” new world for legal professionals

Janet Ellen Raasch

Janet Ellen Raasch is a writer, ghostwriter and blogger (www.constantcontentblog.com) who works closely with professional services providers – especially lawyers, law firms, legal consultants and legal organizations – to help them achieve name recognition and new business through publication of keyword-rich content for Web sites as well as articles and books for traditional print media. She can be reached at (303) 399-5041 or jeraasch@msn.com.

In the current economic environment, many lawyers and other legal professionals are closely studying print and online job ads – looking for work (or for better work). Only 20 percent of available jobs, however, are ever advertised. Eighty percent of jobs are obtained not through advertisements -- but through networking.

To network successfully in the course of a job search, you must first develop a personal brand and then clearly communicate your brand to others in a wide range of traditional and electronic networking opportunities. Your personal brand states who you are and differentiates you from all others seeking the same position.

“Your personal brand is more than a list of skills and accomplishments; it also includes your unique character strengths and values,” said Linda Sollars. “It is the best answer to the most commonly asked job-interview question: ‘Tell me something about yourself.’”

Sollars discussed the role of personal branding in a job search at the monthly educational program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain), which took place June 9 at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Denver. Reacting to her presentation was a panel of legal recruiters.

Sollars is principal of Creating Purpose (www.creatingpurpose.com), where she helps job seekers identify their strengths and develop personal statements as a foundation for career development. She holds a Master’s Degree in Adult Development and a Global Career Development Instructor certification. She teaches at Regis University and is training coordinator for the Jefferson County Workforce Center in Golden, Colorado.

Develop a personal brand

“Any job transition offers the opportunity for positive change,” said Sollars. “Before you determine what you want to do, you need to determine who you are. What strengths and values supplement your skills to make you different from all of the other job seekers out there? Are you on the right career path or is it time to make a change?”

Sollars recommends that all job seekers take the VIA Survey of Character (www.viasurvey.org), a scientifically validated tool that asks 240 questions to identify an individual's 24 signature strengths within six categories:

Wisdom and knowledge – Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge, including:

- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Judgment and open-mindedness
- Love of learning
- Perspective

Courage – Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, including:

- Bravery
- Perseverance
- Honesty
- Zest

Humanity – Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others, including:

- Capacity to love and be loved
- Kindness
- Social intelligence

Justice – Civic strengths that underlie health community life, including:

- Teamwork
- Fairness
- Leadership

Temperance – Strengths that protect against excess, including:

- Forgiveness and mercy
- Modesty and humility
- Prudence
- Self-regulation

Transcendence – Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning, including:

- Appreciation of beauty and excellence

Gratitude
Hope
Humor
Religiousness and spirituality

When making a career change, you can also discover your unique character strengths by asking others what they value about their relationship with you. You should also set aside some time to question yourself. What inspires you? On your very best days, what skills and character strengths are you using?

“Once you understand your signature character strengths, you can use them to guide your career choices and create a personal brand,” said Sollars. “When competing for a job against others who have similar skills and accomplishments, it is these character strengths that will differentiate you and make a unique impression.

“Choose your top three character strengths and determine how they could be of value to a potential employer. Incorporate them into your personal brand statement. When asked to ‘Tell me something about yourself,’ for example, you could state:

Because of my *love of learning*, I keep current with the latest developments in my profession – which I share with my employer and co-workers. Because I *persevere* in the face of opposition, I keep going on a project when others get discouraged and give up. Because I am *self-regulated*, I am able to control my own impulses and put the needs of my employer ahead of my own personal needs.

“Connect the market, your skills and your personal passion,” said Sollars.

Communicate your personal brand

Once you understand the skills and values behind your personal brand, you should develop a short “brand statement” and practice communicating it to others within the context of the networking activities that lead to new jobs.

“When working with my clients, I recommend that they leave voice messages for themselves -- until they are perfectly satisfied with the way this statement sounds. Send it to your friends and ask them for feedback. If you are being authentic, it is not bragging. Practice. Practice. Practice.

“Once you have mastered your brand statement, put it to work in your networking activities. Think about the job you want and where to find the people in that industry. It might be a geographic location, a civic or professional group, or an online social network. You also can network by volunteering, teaching or writing.

“I got my job with the Workforce Center by spending three weeks at a grocery store near the center and asking the people waiting in line whether if they knew anyone who worked

at the Center. When I met someone who did, I passed along my resume – and the rest is history.

“It is essential that you take control of first creating your unique brand and then marketing it by strategically and tirelessly networking – with those you know and those you do not yet know,” said Sollars. “Be proactive. Understand what you want and ask for it. You are the CMO of your own career.”

Panel discussion

Elaborating on Sollars’ presentation and discussing the job market for legal professionals was a panel of legal recruiters, moderated by Andrew Hudson, founder and CEO of Andrew Hudson’s Job List (www.ahjobslist.com). Participants were Melinda Delmonico, president and CEO of Gibson Arnold & Associates (www.gibsonarnold.com); David Fennell, founder of Law Q (www.lawqteam.com); and Sarah Gieringer, search consultant at The Advocates (www.targetedlegal.com).

“Never underestimate the power of a strong personal brand,” said Hudson. “Have concrete short, medium and long-term career goals and take the steps to get there, including ongoing professional development and networking. If you need to find a new job, express confidence and passion, and clearly demonstrate your problem-solving capabilities. Many of us were raised to be modest; this is not the time for modesty.”

“Even when working with a recruiter, do not sit back and wait for the recruiter to do all the work,” said Delmonico. “You need to be an equal participant – especially on the networking side of things. I once worked with a lawyer who had relocated. He uncovered a job opportunity by spending time at the airport in his new city, introducing himself to obvious business travelers and asking them if the legal departments in their companies were hiring. One of these leads worked for him.”

“Do not wait until you need a job to create your personal brand and your network,” said Gieringer. “This should be an ongoing, lifelong process. Even when you are not looking for a job, make it a priority to get out and talk to people about your personal brand and goals. When interviewing, emphasize results – not potential. If you were laid off, provide a list of references to counterbalance the perceived negatives of any layoff.”

“Once you have your personal statement and resume in place,” said Fennell, “you should focus on your appearance and presentation skills – for both interviews and networking events. An immediate, positive first impression is essential. Eighty percent of a first impression is based on non-verbal elements like dress, grooming, posture (seated and standing), handshake and eye contact. Engage in mock interviews with an expert, ask for suggestions and make the changes necessary to make a positive first impression.

“Finally,” said Fennell, “don’t be ‘antsy’ -- too quick to accept the first offer that comes along. Think about where you want to be three, five and ten years down the road. Know what you want and hold out for the best.”