



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by Stephen Seckler

Marketing As a Career-Development Strategy

Once upon a time, law school graduates could join a firm right out of school, work hard for several years, do great legal work, and expect to become a partner at the same firm.

About 20 years ago, the world began to change, and today few junior associates at major firms have any real expectation of being elevated to partner.

In addition, the new paradigm is that any associate who does hope to win the brass ring is well advised to learn how to generate business.¹

In reality, every associate can benefit from developing marketing skills even if the goal is not partnership at a large firm. There are a number of significant benefits to developing a marketing mentality early in your career.

If you do develop business, you will find that having the clients will give you more professional independence and help you build more respect within your firm.

But marketing your services can also help you move in-house, make it easier to switch firms, or help you leave the practice of law altogether if you decide the law is not for you.

In short, spending time on marketing activities can help your career flourish, whatever your career objectives may be.

Anyone Can Learn

Professional services marketing is a skill that can be learned by anyone because it is fundamentally about relationship building.

If you can build relationships over time and develop a reputation for being a reliable and trustworthy problem-solver, the business will flow. Of course, it is important to be strategic about which professional relationships you cultivate.

Much has been written about how to meet other professionals. Public speaking, writing professional articles, getting active in an industry organization, playing golf, taking up a hobby that has a social component, becoming an active member of your bar association, sending newsletters and other items of interest to individuals on a mailing list, providing pro bono legal advice for a nonprofit organization or individual, and becoming active in

town government are all excellent ways to get out and meet the business community.

There are many other viable ways as well. Why then are some lawyers successful marketers, while others fail? What are some of the ways to increase your likelihood of success?

- **Have a focused plan, and stick to it.** The Central Artery wasn't built in a day, and neither is a professional network. Therefore, it is important to establish a marketing plan that will keep you on track over a period of time.

But before you can even establish a plan, you need to decide what your objectives are in meeting other professionals. A haphazard or shotgun approach is unlikely to yield much success.

For example, if you are very interested in the computer industry, you will want to think of places you can go and activities you can get involved in where you will meet individuals in this industry.

If you attend meetings with 10 different industry groups, you will never get to know anyone well enough to make the contacts that you need.

- **Be consistent.** It is better to do a little bit repeatedly over a long period of time than to do something big on one occasion.

Potential clients need to see and hear your name repeatedly before they are willing to contact you. You also want to make sure that they have seen your name recently when they do have a need for your services. This can only happen if you are visible over a period of time.

Potential clients remember you through a combination of seeing your name in an article, meeting with you face to face, hearing you make a presentation, or receiving your article by email. A combination of contacts, repeated over time, pays off.

- **Start now.** Generating business is very much like investing for a child's college education. The sooner you begin making the investment, the quicker you will see the returns.

Like saving for a college education, it is also much easier to build up good will over time than it is to convince a new business acquaintance to hand you a large retainer at your first meeting.

- **Be helpful.** Go the extra mile to help clients, associates, and partners solve their legal, business, and non-business problems. Do favors for people.

Be sincerely helpful (e.g., by pitching in to finish a project, providing free advice, or offering to find other resources to help an individual).

Each of these gestures can build your practice because they build relationships, build trust, and create a natural willingness to reciprocate and help you gain business.

- **Hire a coach, or work with someone inside your firm.** Many of the principles of marketing are not rocket science. But if it is so easy, why do many fail? Simply put, with so many competing demands on busy lawyers, it is hard to stay focused on marketing over time. A good coach can help you make good use of your limited time. A good coach can also make sure that you are continuing to do what you set out to do.

There are new skills to learn, and just like in professional sports, having an outside pair of eyes watching over

you, teaching and encouraging you, can make the difference between mediocre performance and excellence.

- **Think of yourself as a farmer.** Marketing is much more akin to farming than to hunting; but if an opportunity comes up, don't be afraid to ask for the business.

In most instances, you will be cultivating relationships and planting seeds over a long period of time (i.e., several years), rather than asking anyone to retain you.

But sometimes while you are out "farming," you will come across a business person or individual who has a present legal need that you can satisfy.

- **Develop relationships with partners and associates at your current firm.** Even if you do not plan to stay at your current firm, it behooves you to get to know the partners and associates with whom you work.

Associates who leave large firms can often develop a healthy referral business from conflict cases or matters that are too small for the large firm to handle.

- **Do what you like.** There is no single correct way to cultivate relationships and no need to get involved in every marketing activity listed above.

If you do not like golf, you should not be on a golf course. If you are an introvert, there is no need to spend hours at networking functions feeling uncomfortable surrounded by a lot of strangers. Don't pursue relationships with individuals with whom you do not enjoy spending time.

Instead, think of ways to combine your personal interests with your marketing objectives. If you are an introvert, you can start by writing articles. You can develop a mailing list and start sending clippings and articles to clients and potential clients.

Do non-billable favors for existing clients. Take the time to get to know your clients' businesses. Ask your clients to introduce you to other businesspeople in their industries. Find ways to make use of the Internet (e.g., by participating in industry discussions online).

Conclusion

Much more can be said about how to succeed in marketing yourself as a lawyer. The most important thing to remember, however, is that you should always be spending some portion of your time building your network of contacts.

If your goal is partnership, business generation will be very important. If going in-house is your objective, marketing activities will give you the chance to meet future potential employers long before you are actually searching for a new job.

Staying in your office and doing great legal work may have once been the keys to success in a law firm. Applying for jobs that are advertised may have once been a reasonable strategy for making a switch.

Those days are long gone, and the associates who realize this early in their careers will be in a better position to find career fulfillment down the road.

Building marketing skills is now a requirement for future success.

Endnote

1 This cultural change has been well documented in numerous studies around the country, including several recent studies done by the Boston Bar Association.