

Everybody Loves Rainmakers

So how can firms stand out and vie for the best lateral partners? **BY DAN BINSTOCK**



It's a busy time for lateral-partner hiring. Whether it's through an acquisition of another firm or through individual hires, almost all firms are actively looking for, or very much open to, this kind of growth opportunity. Firms know that hiring a lateral partner with a book of business is the quickest way to increase revenues and expand the scope of their work.

As a legal-search consultant, I regularly meet with law firms that are anxious to recruit partners with \$1 million or more in business who can help expand their existing practices. I often hear comments such as, "We're very anxious to meet with partners in any of our practice areas, so long as they have big books of business."

It's interesting to observe, however, that although most of the larger firms have well-oiled recruiting machines for associates, in most cases partner recruiting is much less strategic. Although firms do a great job of tailoring their recruiting or marketing messages for associates and summer associates, these same messages are often neglected when it comes to partner candidates. Rather than taking the time to craft a recruiting message that focuses on the benefits they can offer lateral partners—or how they can best distinguish themselves from the competition—many firms simply stop the analysis too early.

But many law firms could do a much better job of enhancing their recruiting strategy to better attract prospective partner candidates.

WE WANT RAINMAKERS

Most large firms want the same types of partners—the ones who have at least \$1 million in portable business and are good team players. These rainmakers are often greatly valued at their current firm and treated very well. They are well known and typically approached by other firms on a regular basis. If you are looking to recruit partners in this select category, you are likely in good company.

Many firms simply decide that they want to increase their profits per partner or their work in a particular practice, and the quickest way to do this is by bringing in a rainmaker. The problem arises when, rather than focusing on an effective recruiting strategy that communicates what makes their firm unique and why a lateral partner could benefit from working with them, firms simply "ask and pray." They "ask" search consultants to deliver rainmakers and "pray" they appear. Often, these firms are disappointed with the results.

Here's how this plays out in the real world. When I sit down to

talk with partners about lateral partner hiring, they usually start off by saying something to the effect of, "We'd really like to expand our litigation, so we could use some partners with big books of business." At this point, I gently ask, "Can you help me out a little by letting me know what distinguishes your firm and practice from the other 100-plus firms in the city who are also looking to attract this same, small category of partners?"

The partners all look at each other quizzically, and the partner I asked cleverly deflects to another partner: "Dave, want to take a stab at answering that one?" Then, Dave answers with something to the effect of, "We don't have any jerks, we believe in cross-selling and supporting our partners, we have a great reputation, and our profits per partner are improving." While these are certainly good selling points, they are virtually the same ones used by their competitors.

If a firm has a renowned practice in a particular area, its reputation will go a long way in attracting that rainmaker's initial attention. But a good number of firms are looking to bring in partners to start new practice areas or, often, fix existing ones that may be foundering or treading water. Because these practices do not benefit from strong reputations, they face larger challenges. In these cases, it's especially important that firms take the time to craft a unique recruiting message for partner candidates.

Most firms are able to do a great job of selling their firm once a lateral partner comes in the door to interview. But many firms miss having the opportunity to speak with lateral rainmakers because their earlier recruiting efforts sell themselves short.

Want to see a real-world example? Choose a large firm and go to its Web site. Now visit the lateral-attorney recruiting section. You will likely see that they do a good job recruiting associates and summer associates. They provide extensive details on what makes their firm unique, and how their associates benefit, personally and professionally, from working there. But is there anything targeted at partners, other than contact information for partner candidates?

Today, a law firm's Web site is the main tool for communicating with the public, which includes, of course, prospective lateral candidates. Yet most law firm Web sites are virtually silent with regard to partner recruiting. They're missing a golden opportunity to highlight their unique strengths and selling points.

Perhaps this reluctance is deliberate by some firms. According to

Susan Manch, a principal at Shannon & Manch, a legal management consulting firm in Washington, D.C., “Historically, the very most prestigious firms in the country did not hire lateral partners. While this is rarely the case today at most firms, perhaps some firms may feel overly concerned that actively recruiting and marketing to partners could be viewed as a sign of weakness. But in the current market, where competition for top lateral partners is fierce, if done properly, it makes sense.”

In the real world, when I am trying to recruit a partner for a particular firm, at the end of the call the partner almost always says, “I’ll take some time to check out the firm’s Web site and will get back to you.” While the candidate can read about a firm’s practice areas and read the attorney biographies on the site, this type of information does not directly address the partner’s biggest internal questions: “Why should I speak to this firm, would I fit in there, and can I benefit by joining them?” By not attempting to even acknowledge these questions up front, a firm’s Web site can lose a partner’s interest rather quickly.

If you want to effectively recruit top lateral partners—and unless your firm’s prestige and reputation is enough by itself to set you apart from your competitors—it’s critical to effectively communicate the information that lateral partners are seeking.

GET THE MESSAGE OUT

Rainmakers do not want to feel that they are being recruited to help fix a firm’s problems or serve as the firm’s “savior.” If a firm cannot articulate its partner-recruiting strategy beyond “seeking partners with portable business in five of our seven practice areas,” this does not provide much comfort regarding the firm’s current state or forward-looking strategic plan. Here are some strategies to help firms improve their recruiting messages.

- Take the perspective of “what’s in it for you” with possible partners. If you can focus on what might benefit the candidate, you’ll certainly gain his attention much quicker.

Here’s an example. When distinguishing themselves from their competition, many firms make statements such as, “Our ___ practice group was recently ranked No. 1 in the ___ survey, and new clients are approaching us.” Though this is an admirable achievement, it could be more compelling if put in the “What’s in it for you?” format. For example, “Our firm’s recent No. 1 ranking in the ___ practice area survey has opened the door to several fruitful meetings with three Fortune 100 clients within the past three months. As a partner in our ___ group, you’ll benefit from this association. You will have access to a group of clients that you might not otherwise have access to, and this will lead to more cross-selling opportunities for you. With this reach, you’ll be able to attract more business and better clients.”

When using this approach, it’s important to be very specific about the benefits your firm provides. More generic statements such as “You’ll have a good support staff,” “You’ll work in a group that values teamwork,” or “We’ll support your marketing efforts” are often not unique enough to get the attention of rainmakers.

More specific statements will be more compelling. For example, instead of “You will have a good support staff,” try, “We provide partners with the most experienced secretaries in the firm, which ensures that you have the best people helping you.” Instead of “You’ll work in a group that values teamwork,” try, “Our partnership-compensation model truly compensates teamwork by giving a large amount of credit for referring new matters to other partners within the firm. Thus, part-

ners have incentives to introduce you to new clients because it’s to everybody’s benefit, including yours.”

- Learn the “three-minute speech.” Let’s say you are looking to expand your intellectual-property practice through lateral partner acquisitions. If you had the hypothetical chance to set up a conference call with all the star IP rainmakers from other firms in your city, but you only had three minutes to deliver your recruiting presentation, what would you say in those three minutes to gain their attention and interest?

Could you quickly articulate, in specific terms, what makes your firm or practice unique? Could you clearly explain how your firm can provide cross-selling opportunities to prospective IP partners? Could you show that you have fully researched what is required to grow an IP practice and that your firm is committed to an IP practice for the long term? Could you explain why your firm should appeal to rainmakers on both a professional and personal level? Of course, this would be difficult to do for most people, but the process of trying to answer these questions in three minutes will go a long way in helping you fine-tune your core recruiting message.

If you have trouble clearly articulating benefits that make your firm unique, this may be a sign that your firm’s strong focus on hiring lateral partners is an attempt to conceal or fix larger internal problems.

- Take advantage of your Web site. Having an effectively crafted partner-recruiting section on your Web site often makes sense. (But do remember that your clients may read it as well, so bear this in mind when determining what type of information is appropriate to include.)

List the breadth of your practice, clients (if acceptable), and particular areas in which new partners could be a good fit (avoid saying “everywhere,” because this risks making you appear that you have no strategic plan and are simply looking for saviors). Provide illustrations about life as a partner at your firm. Include testimonials from lateral partners discussing why they chose your firm and why they stayed. Discuss your support services for partners. Discuss how you support their marketing efforts and cross-marketing efforts. Talk about areas of targeted growth and why your firm is looking to enhance its capabilities in these areas. Discuss the type of technology you use. Discuss the types of partners that excel and how you support them. Discuss how new partners benefit at your firm.

- Share this information with your search consultant. Many firms engage search consultants to help with lateral-partner recruiting. If you do, the best thing you can do is invest 30 minutes and educate him or her on your firm’s particular selling points (above and beyond what exists on your Web site). If a search consultant is able to speak intelligently about your firm in detail and articulate specific reasons that your firm may make sense to a particular partner, the search firm will be much more likely to prioritize your search and bring you more candidates.

Some of the steps outlined here require a bit more investment of time up front. But in this market, rainmakers don’t fall out of the clouds. If you are truly committed to attracting the right partners for you, following these strategies will go a long way toward giving you a competitive edge in your recruiting over many other firms in your city.

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