

Making Rain: Ingredients for Success

What is the secret to building a book of business? Why do some partners succeed in developing work, while others, who appear to have everything going for them, are unable to get off the ground? The intangible factors are very important. They include self-discipline, gumption, interpersonal finesse, and a willingness to risk. Setting aside the intangibles and issues that vary from firm to firm, such as billing rates and how matters are credited, to begin, the focus has to be on a number of core ingredients that are required and need to be adjusted on an ongoing basis:

Ask and Ye Shall Receive

One of the greatest distinguishing factors among partners who successfully and regularly originate business is that they ask for it. In any kind of service-oriented profession there are three steps that must be taken before the "ask." They are:

Make a Connection

Relationships are everything. Clients and potential clients are first and foremost human beings. Sometimes it is uncomfortable for people to request what they want, and that should never be the focus of a meeting or a conversation when developing business. First a connection needs to be made, whether it is professional or a few polite questions that lead to common ground. Do you know someone in common? Are you both golf fanatics? Good interviewers always break the ice, and asking for business is a job interview, as is serving it and building those ties on current matters. Social decorum, politeness, and friendliness are as important as power and expertise. So behave with class.

Relay the Vision

After establishing a connection, it is time to talk about the ways that your firm or practice can serve a potential client's needs. What are your success stories with similar clients? What is it that makes your firm uniquely qualified for this client? If you know who your competition is, study them and draw a picture that distinguishes you without saying anything negative about the other guy. I want to stress that illustrating why you and your firm might be better does not mean trashing another firm or attorney. In fact, it is a lot more impressive and implies great confidence to say something positive or polite about the competition and then talk about what you can do for the firm without referring to or mentioning the other guy unless the client directly asks for you to lay out the differences, in which case you do it fairly and honestly. The client will get the picture if you've done your homework either way.

The Ask

We all hate rejection. I would be willing to bet that the aversion to being told no and the desire to avoid that discomfort has been responsible for the loss of billions of dollars of revenue. It is a reality that has to be faced. There are only a limited number of possible responses, so all of us who do client development simply have to accept this and suck it up. Rejection isn't pleasant, but the more you put yourself out there, the more easily you will learn something each time and not take it so personally when the answer is no. Now, about the "ask": you've connected with the client, you've presented information about yourself and your firm. Take a deep breath and say, "I would appreciate any opportunity to work with you." That's it. If they say no, ask them if they have any feedback on why or in what circumstances they might. The issues might be easily addressed. If they are, follow up later. Follow up anyway down the road. Things change and waiting for them to come to you is not a strategy. Regardless of their response be gracious and say thank you. Never burn a bridge with anyone. You never know when your paths may cross again.

Those are the core basics of developing business. Prior to applying the rule of "Ask and Ye Shall Receive," there is a lot you can do to lay the groundwork, whether you are a partner or a rising associate. The foundation for business development is an on-going project that requires attention. It is as critical as billing time if you are going to achieve great things. Here are some suggestions for activities and strategies:

Networking -- Join LinkedIn and put a profile up. It is an amazing resource and you will be surprised to see how many contacts you have who can make an introduction for you or give you a recommendation. It is an excellent tool to have in your arsenal. The same goes for attending meetings and conferences. But if you go, you have to talk to people. If there is someone you've always wanted to meet, go shake their hand and introduce yourself and always have business cards.

Speaking Engagements and Articles -- Market yourself. Does your firm ever offer seminars on subjects of interest? Are you a member of a particular bar section? One path to getting speaking engagements is writing and publishing articles of interest. It builds your reputation and enhances your standing as an expert. Again there is the ask piece: Contact organizations that do continuing education or seminars and ask if you can send over your biography and a list of articles, etc. and let them know you'd like to be considered as a speaker. Talk with colleagues at your firm about starting a practice group blog. Send interesting links or articles and speaking announcements to current and prospective clients.

Have a Business Plan -- Even if you already have a healthy book of business and are content with your current firm, annually reviewing your business and analyzing your contacts is a very helpful practice. It is like a personal "firm retreat" where you can look at the big picture, acknowledge what has worked and what has not, and figure out what is missing or where those opportunities are that in the rush of daily practice you have not recognized. Adjust your rudders whenever you need to or commit to trying something different or new in your approach. Simply setting aside a couple of hours a week or setting a goal of doing six hours a month of business development and working on outreach or passing along an article to your clients can lead to referrals.

Some cultures do not lend themselves well to cross-marketing. Others lack any flexibility in billing rates. If you have had to turn down business because of your firm's rates, keep track of this and go out of your way to refer that potential client to a firm or attorney that you know and can recommend that can do the work at a more manageable cost. Most people don't take the time to do this, but referrals, whether from the client who is surprised by your generosity in suggesting someone else or the attorney surprised to receive a call saying you recommended him or her, are one of the **greatest sources** of work. What goes around comes around, and the legal world is not so large. So don't be petty. Practice the mentality of abundance. You may be surprised how things come back to you or how a client you once referred to a colleague shows up in your life at a later date with a different company and is pleased to work with you or speaks highly of you.

These theories and practices work, although the real world of **law firm practice** is sometimes frantic and has its share of obstacles. Finding time can be a challenge, as can knowing where to start, but once you do it gets easier. It is in your professional best interest to cultivate these skills if you have the capacity to do so. There is much to be gained by learning and practicing the art of making rain.

See [30 Ways to Generate Business as an Attorney](#) for more information.