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Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

Five Effective Strategies for Law Firm Partners to Get Business and Clients

Summary: Learn five effective strategies law firm partners can use to get business and clients in today's modern legal landscape.

Effective Strategies for Law Firm Partners to Get Business and Clients

It seems almost like an urban myth now, but we've all heard tales of the legendary rainmakers of the past. They were the ones who brought in enough business to sustain a cadre of lawyers slaving away at desks by merely the strength of their personality and charisma. All it took was belonging to the right clubs, having a decent golf handicap and the gift of gab, and voilà ... you had a client for life. Client management entailed maintaining the personal and trusted relationships you developed through an effective "schmooze."

- See [**You Need Relationships before Transactions**](#) for more information.

It's not quite so easy anymore. We've moved from a client-focused business model to one that is client-driven. Clients call the shots and make the rules.

Why Are Things So Different?

It's not only much more difficult to get new clients, it's also incredibly difficult to keep your existing ones – often no matter the results you obtain on their behalf. There are a number of reasons why – here are a few:

- *Increased competition. Competition in the legal industry is fierce. Many large firms have robust depth and breadth as well as sophisticated marketing and client*



management programs. Competition comes from other places, too, besides law firms. For instance, there are consultants and advisors who offer services that were previously the purview of lawyers. Plus, the high cost of legal services causes some clients to decide not to move forward and/or to do it themselves.

- *A leveled playing field. In the view of many clients, one lawyer or firm often looks similar to others in a number of dimensions that previously offered competitive advantages. Some of the dimensions in which there is greater parity include cost/price, geographic coverage, technical expertise, and services offered.*
- *Hiring decisions that are driven by more than results or a good relationship. The decision-making process is often more neutral than before. Factors such as cost, value-added services offered, and the ability to make an effective pitch often weigh heavily.*

We've also seen a trend of decisions being made by people who have less of a stake in the relationship with a lawyer or firm. For instance, after Sarbanes-Oxley, more law departments took on all of the hiring decisions. In client interviews it's common to hear the phrase, "Lawyers hire lawyers."

This has moved the decision away from the business people whom a lawyer might work with most closely. We've also seen an increase in the incidences of procurement departments becoming involved in hiring law firms.

- *More sophisticated clients. Particularly because inside lawyers are increasingly hiring outside lawyers, the client base is more sophisticated.*

There are other reasons for this growing sophistication, too – many clients now have much more experience with the legal process due to the proliferation of lawsuits and the increased amount of deal-making in corporate America. Plus, there is greater transparency to the legal process now – thanks to the Internet and televised legal proceedings. More sophisticated clients are apt to shop around to assure they're getting exactly what they want at the price they want.



Relationships Are Still Key

This is not to say that the relationship between a lawyer and his or her client isn't important. In fact, despite the evidence presented above, having a close and trusted relationship is still the best way to ensure that you have a client for life.

Service delivery and client management are the primary dimensions in which lawyers or firms can differentiate themselves competitively. It is of utmost importance that partners manage their client relationships systematically, focusing significant time and attention on this aspect of practicing law.

There are a number of strategies and tactics to consider for developing and maintaining the type of client base that will offer professional fulfillment and career enjoyment as well as profitability, as you'll see below.

- **See [How to Develop Business as a Lawyer \(How Lawyers Can Get Clients\)](#) for more information.**

Underlying the following activities is the premise that you must understand your clients thoroughly. We often have a chance to ask clients to describe the characteristics of an excellent lawyer. Almost 100 percent of the time, one of the most important aspects cited is the ability of outside lawyers to deeply understand the client so that they are pragmatic, offering commercial-minded advice, and delivering service in the manner the client desires. This speaks to the level of responsiveness expected, the level of client involvement desired, and the efficiency with which advice and services are offered.

Consider These Strategies

Here is an examination of five activities to consider in your personal planning.

1. Client Feedback (*Think Like a Client*). Recently we have finally seen an increase in



the number of client feedback programs that law firms are engaging in. This development should have occurred years ago.

It is impossible to differentiate yourself with service delivery and client management if you don't regularly talk to your clients to understand their preferences and perceptions. No matter how close the relationship, you cannot presume to know what's best for the client without asking.

See the following articles for more information:

- [**Law Firm Client Feedback Strategies**](#)
- [**Talk and Listen to Your Clients**](#)
- [**Taking Action Based on Client Preferences**](#)
- [**How to Get Client Feedback**](#)

Years of conducting client interviews have shown that there is often a gap between what the lawyer believes the client is thinking and what the client is actually thinking. When considering how best to obtain client feedback, a three-step approach is often most effective.

- *Relationship lawyer.* The lawyer managing the relationship should regularly visit with the client. Depending on the client's preference, try to have in-person visits as often as feasible — there is huge value to “face time.” In these meetings, discuss the client's satisfaction with the handling of current and past matters and future needs, and learn of developments or trends in their business or industry.
- *Managing partner/senior management.* The firm's most significant clients should have periodic visits from someone in firm management who is not involved in the relationship. This communicates to clients how important they are to the firm, and allows them an opportunity to address any concerns. It also gives clients a chance to learn more about what is going on at the law firm that might be of interest or



benefit to them.

- *Formal interviews* conducted by a neutral, trained interviewer. On a periodic basis, take an objective look across the firm's entire client base through more formal client interviews.

Clients are much more candid and forthcoming when speaking to a neutral interviewer because there is less fear of hurting someone's feelings and/or experiencing repercussions. These interviews are more in-depth and cover topics such as the client's perception of the firm's market position and their opinions about competitors; an analysis of hiring processes and the firms they use; preferences and opinions about service delivery options; trends and developments in the client's company or industry; and satisfaction with the firm and lawyers.

2. Client Teams. Managing sophisticated, complex relationships requires a team approach.

From the client's perspective, they gain: a diversity of thinking and creativity; well-prepared back-up; "one-stop" shopping; and cost efficiency since they don't have to continuously re-educate their lawyers or recreate the wheel for each legal matter.

Most law firms are putting focused teams in place, including practice groups, client teams, industry teams, and sales pitch teams. However, the results are often disappointing, and many team leaders and members lament the fact that all this has led to is more meetings to attend. It would be easy to say that teams don't work or make a difference, but the culprit is in the way teams are being implemented.

Usually teams are formed and structures put in place (e.g., meetings, agendas, assignments) without attention being paid to the team's behaviors and dynamics. However, there is accumulating evidence in behavioral science research to the effect that healthy group dynamics are statistically linked with profitability. Unless group leaders and members have a greater understanding of the behaviors that are within their control that



affect healthy group dynamics (and ultimately productivity and profitability), they will not be as successful as possible, and will become disenchanted.

This understanding is gleaned from training, as well as from the group's willingness to learn about the normal stages of group development and how to effectively establish goals, assign roles, develop trust, and work through conflict.

3. Education of Clients and/or Adding Value. Clients want more for their legal spending these days. They expect their outside lawyers to add value by educating them, through seminars or other training programs; they expect tools to help make their jobs easier (e.g., checklists, prior work product, reference guides); they want streamlined communications such as through extranets or portals; and they want to be kept abreast of developments that affect them without having to ask.

Your ability to provide these additional services (often at no additional cost) will help you gain competitive advantage.

4. Market Research and Business Intelligence. Law firms have long had the tools to gather and analyze internal intelligence (e.g., firms can pull data from their billing and accounting systems to compare lawyers, assess hours and rates, and look at other processes necessary for internal management of people and resources). But now, there is a proliferation of business and market intelligence tools and systems available so lawyers can look outwardly and assess the marketplace factors that affect their business.

This takes many forms and is used for many purposes. Some of the most common include:

- identifying and targeting prospective clients;
- seeking ways to expand relationships with existing clients,
- targeting prospective lawyers for lateral hires,



- finding targets for mergers and acquisitions and then analyzing these opportunities;
- researching industries and providing data to inform client team, industry team and practice group plans;
- making decisions about expansion by looking at geographic and industry factors; and
- launching new service or product offerings.

Business intelligence can be a powerful tool for you in your marketing efforts, but you must first understand the tools and technologies available, and second, have very clear goals (otherwise it can be prohibitively expensive).

5. Client Service. If clients are choosing from among several firms that are relatively equal to them, they are going to prefer the firm that delivers a totally satisfying experience. As a partner, you should consider how to offer the best experience possible in terms of client service.

Take some time to think about how your phones are answered; how responsive you are; what your Web site communicates; how easy, accurate, and clear your bills are; how professionally your associates and support staff act; and how neat and accurate your communications are. Are your clients merely satisfied, or are you delighting them?

If your assessment turns up any deficiencies, consider changes that you can make that will keep your clients coming back to you.

While there are many other things that can contribute to the success of a partner in a law firm, the activities listed above are an excellent starting point. They will draw you closer to your clients and arm you with the information and tools needed to always be your clients' number one choice.

Kick off the year by writing a clear-cut and meaningful personal business plan, and then manage your time effectively so that you can implement your plan.



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Read the following articles for more information:

- [**Sample Attorney Business Plans and the Case for Attorney Business Plans**](#)
- [**Business Plans Revealed**](#)
- [**Partner Business Plans: Key Elements**](#)
- [**Partner Business Plans**](#)
- [**Your Career Is Your Business. So What's Your Business Plan?**](#)

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