

# Do Attorneys Need to Develop Business?

By *Carolina Ramirez* from *New York Office, Recruiter*

I knew long before I became a legal recruiter how important it is to become your own salesperson and generate your own book of business as an attorney. Oddly enough, this is something they never talk about in law school and is also rarely talked about during your summer associate "internship" or your first few years as a young attorney.

The truth of the matter is that I think this is one of the most important skills you can have to be a successful attorney. Another fact is that this skill comes naturally to some people and is like pulling teeth for others.

When it comes to attorneys, very few attorneys have this skill, and I would say the majority prefer to stay behind closed doors, work hard, get it right and be content with just being good at the legal work.

For me, the best part of practicing was networking, meeting people, talking on the phone, going to lunches and drinks with clients, connecting people, attending conferences, etc. You couldn't pay me to go back to being at a desk all day, hovering over complicated legal texts.

But as we all know, every firm needs rainmakers and workhorses. While you need both skills to succeed, I would argue that developing business is ultimately much more important to your long term success as an attorney.

## Why is Business Development so Important to Law Firm Attorneys?

There are many reasons why generating business is key to your success as an attorney. And the earlier you start, the better, and here is why:

*First, as a young attorney, it shows your firm's leaders that you can speak to clients and make them like you.* Doing so shows that you can relate to people, are mature enough to be at the grown-ups' table, and that they can trust you with clients on your own. Bringing in clients right away will set you apart from all the other first-year or junior associates and make your mentors and superiors go to bat for you when it comes to promotions, salary, and bonuses.

Second, it shows you are invested in the firm and want to grow the firm's business. When I was an associate, I brought in several small clients. Despite the dollar amounts being small, the firm saw that I was genuinely interested and excited about bringing in clients, no doubt one reason I lasted as long as I did at the firm. It also showed the firm that I was devoted to the firm and wanted to stick around.

Third, if you can bring in your own clients, the firm leadership will want to include you in other client pitches. Being included in pitches is valuable for many reasons, including expanding your network and getting exposure to other clients and firm leadership.

Fourth, if things start to slow down at your firm or the relationship takes a turn for the worse for whatever reason, you can leave the firm with portable business. Having clients of your own that you can bring to another firm or even start your own practice with is fundamental to your long-term career success. When things slow down, you want to ensure you have loyal clients who choose you over the firm where you practice.

## Why Don't Firms Encourage Associates to Generate Business?

If business development is so important, why don't firms take the time or invest money in teaching or

encouraging associates to generate business? This is a bit of a mystery to me. And this is not to say that all firms are the same.

Some firms have a business development budget for their associates. But the size of that budget varies widely from firm to firm. As an aside, knowing what I know now, this is something I would ask during my summer associate interviews, "how big is my business development budget as an associate"?

When I lateralled as a third-year, I was lucky to land at a firm that encouraged associates to generate business from the get-go. No matter how small the client, this firm wanted us to succeed and wanted us to become rainmakers. They even gave associates origination credit, something incredibly rare at big law firms. Surprisingly, not many associates rose to the challenge. But those who did are now heads of their practice groups.

One theory I have is that firms believe in natural selection. I can only speak from personal experience, but the Big Law law firms in New York City tend to hire more first-year associates than they need. It's essentially a giant game of sink or swim. They want to see who can "survive" with minimal direction or supervision.

One aspect of the big "game" is seeing who will be good at developing business and who won't. Those associates who naturally attract and retain clients don't need the firm's help, and these are the associates they want to keep long-term.

The truth is, some associates are terrible lawyers. Still, they have family connections or other such network advantages and remain employed merely because the firm is betting on their ability to bring these connections as firm clients. Because the firm needs to "weed out" associates, they don't invest in teaching or encouraging business development among associates since terminating associates with no business is a great way to eliminate the excess "fat" from their first-year class.

Another theory is that it is too expensive and time consuming for firms to teach associates, who are not natural rainmakers, how to become one. I urge all associates at every level to start developing business, even if you are not comfortable doing it. Invest in yourself and take business development or marketing classes.

Attend conferences and start giving webinars and speaking on panels. I know one associate at my old firm who went so far as to put aside a substantial amount of his salary towards business development efforts. He is now a partner at the firm. His short-term sacrifice (i.e., receiving less money) paid off in the long run.

## What Happens to Law Firm Associates with No Business?

So, why am I so gung-ho about business development? Since becoming a recruiter, I have realized how invaluable it is to an attorney's career. I always knew it was essential, but I didn't know the full extent of its importance until trying to get attorneys placed. The two most challenging types of attorneys to place during the COVID pandemic have been laid-off 2019 attorneys and senior associates or partners without portable business.

It is surprising and frankly a bit sad that 2019 unemployed associates are getting more traction than senior associates and partner-level attorneys without portable business, despite their lack of experience. The first question I get after submitting a senior level associate or partner-level candidate is: "do they have portable business, and if so, what's the range?"

Despite me going to bat for these candidates, telling the firms that they intend to develop business and have a business plan in place or giving the firms reasons why they don't have business, the point is moot. The response is pretty universal.

"Sorry, we aren't interested."

May this be a lesson to all associates regardless of class year. Start developing your book as soon as you can. Make this a primary goal of yours, and always think of ways to develop business throughout your career.

## **Where Do Unemployed Attorneys Go From Here?**

If your law firm had to let you go due to COVID, regardless if you are a first-year or an experienced partner, I urge you to be patient since the job hunt will be a long one and will require patience and thick skin. You will hear rejection repeatedly, but there is no doubt that persistence will pay off, and you will eventually land somewhere you are happy with.

But most importantly, the lesson I hope attorneys at all stages of their career come away with is that one of your most important goals as an attorney is to generate business and make sure you have loyal clients. It's never too late to start.

Seek advice from mentors, family, friends, and your more extensive network about how to go about generating business; this in and of itself may generate some leads. My point is when such high importance is placed on whether or not you have business as an attorney, you can't afford to stand idly by.

Take control of your career by shaping it through your efforts. If you take this advice, should you ever find yourself in this situation again, you will be able to point to your book of business and know that firms want you, and you have the upper hand in negotiations. Go forth and make it rain!