

By-Lined Article

HOW TO SUCCEED AT BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT: A FIRST-YEAR VIEW

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You'll be too busy to network. You'll never find the time. Your firm is so big and so well-established that you don't need to worry about getting clients. Won't activities outside the firm ruin your billable requirement?

Even if the opportunity came, you don't know enough (or anything for that matter) about the law to make a credible pitch for business. And even if you could make a credible pitch and find someone to listen, you'll never find the type of clients the firm wants.

Sound familiar? Like many first-year associates, I had these thoughts when entering my first year of practice, and I've been told it's a career-long effort to keep those negative thoughts at bay. It's only natural -- no one goes to law school with the idea that they will market or, perish the thought, "sell" anything.

Nevertheless, my firm is helping me, as a first-year associate, to unthink all of these thoughts. In fact, the firm's leadership emphasizes that cultivating marketing and business development skills is as essential to becoming a great lawyer as learning to take a deposition or draft a corporate charter. It's all about uncovering client needs, listening more, talking less and helping create solutions for the clients.

Don't get me wrong -- becoming a top-notch lawyer is the chief objective; that's a given. Adopting certain marketing habits early is far better than waking up one day and wondering why clients aren't beating a path to my door when I haven't planned for my own success. It's an investment my firm is making in me and in the firm's own future.

At my firm, while there is no expectation for new lawyers to bring in Fortune 500 clients, it is stressed that a new lawyer should develop and implement a business development plan. A new lawyer's business development plan should look a great deal different than that of a senior partner with a Rolodex the size of Delaware.

The plan of a first-year associate should include:

- Getting to know the firm and the partners you work with, and providing them with top-quality work product;

- Maintaining contact with friends and reaching out to old acquaintances;
- Building new friendships by getting involved in activities of interest; and
- Exploring opportunities to expand your knowledge of pressing legal issues.

This isn't rocket science, but that doesn't mean it's easy. It takes time, discipline and a willingness to persevere. The payoff? A cadre of clients who rely on you to help them think through business (not just legal) challenges every day.

You Can't Pitch What You Don't Know

Congratulations on already having clients! The first thing I learned at a recent business development seminar for first-year associates was that the firm's partners are my clients, and it will be my interactions with partners during work assignments that determine whether they turn to me for future assignments or recurring business.

I am a proponent of the firm's structure for associate assignment and workload -- no set partner is in charge of assignments; rather, the associates are encouraged to seek assignments directly from the partners. This allows partners to give work to associates with whom they have worked closely and with whom they are satisfied. It also encourages associates to build not only good working relationships (understanding partner/client preferences on writing styles and working hours) but also personal relationships (getting to know the partner/client's background and interests).

Gaining an understanding of the overall foundations and structure of your firm and its clients is vital. My firm has 700 attorneys in 24 offices around the world, and getting to know everyone is clearly impossible. Nonetheless, learning your firm's history, its major administrative players, its practices and industries, and, most importantly, keeping up to date with its key clients and matters is all crucial to cultivating future client solutions.

My firm makes this easy by internally distributing weekly news summaries of articles and headlines featuring the firm's attorneys. It takes five minutes to catch up on what's important both in the firm and the business world. Another easy way to stay current on your firm is to create an e-mail alert for news containing your firm's and key clients' names. When you discover something interesting about a client, let your partners know. They might know about it already, but they'll notice you're paying attention. That's client service, and it begins at home.

Smart Socializing is the Beginning

Business development, at this early stage in a career, can be as simple as meeting law school friends for a drink or reaching out to old high school and college friends through e-mail or Yahoo Messenger. The emphasis at my firm, as described by both our partners and marketing professionals, is not necessarily to secure a meeting with the heads of Yahoo today, but to keep lines of communications open with friends and classmates, who are the leaders of tomorrow.

(Although, Mr. Yang, if you are reading this, please feel free to give me a call. Oh, and you're welcome for that Yahoo Messenger plug.)

That college friend who persuaded you to hitchhike with him from Ann Arbor, Mich., to Bloomington, Ind., at 2 a.m. for a Halloween party may end up realizing his dream and selling his band's album. That neighbor whose Wall Street Journal was somehow always delivered to your door may climb the ranks of corporate America. That girl you dated in California while you both were campaigning for a long-shot congressional candidate may become a congresswoman one day.

One thing is fairly certain -- if you keep in touch with friends and acquaintances, keep up with their achievements and keep them apprised of your successes, they're more likely to turn to you when they need assistance.

Our generation has no excuse for not maintaining these relationships. Technology makes staying in touch with people across the globe as easy as a few keystrokes. A Namibian friend you made on a law school trip to Africa reads your e-mail within seconds of you sending it. You can keep track of that family friend from Holland who moved to Mozambique to start a logging business just by reading his Facebook status updates.

Go Where the Ducks Are

The next aspect of a first-year associate's business plan can also be viewed as more social than work-driven. My firm encourages younger associates to get involved in local activities of interest to meet new, like-minded people from different professions. My own passion happens to be politics, but for someone else, it may be fantasy baseball or ballroom dancing.

I'm fortunate to have the opportunity to work closely with Hersh Kozlov, managing partner of my firm's Cherry Hill, N.J., office. Although we may not agree in our political views, we share the same passion for politics. Aware of my five-year stint in the Democratic Party arena prior to law school, Kozlov has encouraged me to assume political leadership roles at a local

level. Our marketing department also reminds us that associates with sound business reasons for working with trade associations or other activities may be reimbursed for membership fees and costs.

Meeting people outside the legal world is imperative, because it allows you to develop relationships across a breadth of backgrounds and professions, and your contacts may now, or in the future, need your firm's services (perhaps counsel on Mozambique logging disputes).

Participating in groups that interest you allows those outside the legal industry to get to know you and like you, as well as learn that you're a bright lawyer with similar interests. Kozlov quotes legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant: "If you are going to be a successful duck hunter, you must go where the ducks are."

Getting Your Name Out

My firm encourages associates to seek opportunities to write articles about pressing legal and business issues, or to volunteer to help partners write such articles or prepare for their speaking engagements. This may allow you to collaborate with partner/clients with whom you don't ordinarily work and to display your writing skills.

My firm has a public relations team that has built relationships with media around the world and is ready to pitch an article and get it published. However, lack of a large firm's resources should not stop you from aggressively seeking opportunities for publication nor from marketing yourself internally to your partner/clients.

My firm encourages all associates to keep a focus on business and client development. By teaching me how a first-year associate should view business development, outlined in manageable steps such as those above, I've learned that business development is like any other part of the legal profession -- the more you practice, the better you become.

Every great athlete, despite being among the best, works on fundamentals every day. So do the best lawyers. While I'm fortunate to have a multitude of services an e-mail or phone call away to help me implement my business development goals, the most critical variable is me. Even without a professional marketing team behind you, helping you along, you should stay focused on setting manageable and achievable goals, and working on the fundamentals every day, just as you work on becoming the best lawyer you can be for your clients.

It's not "extra" or "if you have time" -- it's a necessity, and it's what clients expect. Developing these skills early on makes you a better lawyer. The right attitude, approach and plan will lead you to success.

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