

Three Tips to Find New Clients

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1. Join organizations of clients.

As any experienced fly fisherman knows, you must go fishing where the fish are. The best place for a lawyer to find potential clients is at an organization of clients. Notice that I didn't say an organization of lawyers. For business development, you want to be the only lawyer in the room, ideally. A lot of attorneys waste time at bar associations looking for new business. Bar associations are essential for associates to develop a reputation and learn the law. However, if you're a litigation partner and you're in the litigation section and you're surrounded by other litigators who are also looking for business, you're in the wrong place.

It makes sense to spend time in a bar association if you practice in a highly-specialized niche area or if you practice at a small boutique and the big firms are likely to refer their conflicts to you. But you'll get better results by being in front of a room of executives who are all in the same industry. If you are the only (or one of a few) attorneys in the room, you're fishing where the fish are.

Further, it's simple to develop a business relationship with potential clients who have gotten together for their own business purposes. It's also easy to strike up a conversation by asking, "Tell me what's going on in your business?" What you want them to talk about is their business problems. Clients view legal issues as *business problems*. If they say, "We're having credit issues with some of our customers," all you need to say to open a new file is, "I can help you with that."

2. Cultivate referral sources.

I know a partner in Chicago, and his entire business development activity is picking up the phone when referral sources telephone him with files. These kinds of situations just don't create themselves. They don't just happen. The reason he was getting these referrals is because earlier in his career, he had methodically built a referral network. To develop new business successfully, you have to get out where there are people who can send you business. They might be bankers; they might be brokers; they most certainly will include attorneys. I recommend you look for attorneys who have a yin-yang relationship with you. In other words, you practice litigation, you should look for lawyers who do strictly business transactions. Put another way, you are looking for a lawyer who is a mirror image of yourself. You're going to find a lot of these attorneys in your own firm, but you'll also find them outside your firm.

To make it work, you need to set up an express referral relationship. You're essentially going into business with your referral sources. The idea is that they're going to send you files, and the other part of the deal is you're going to send files back. It has to be a two-way relationship or it won't work. Make it clear exactly what kind of files you're looking for, or else your referral source will send you house closings when you're looking for product liability cases. And of course, ask the other person what kind of files they want you to send to them.

3. Pursue target companies.

A target is an executive or a general counsel whom you *already know*. Even if you see these executives regularly, it won't occur to them to send you work you even though they know you. You have to *ask for the business*. You have to get into the other person's head, find out what business problems they're facing, and ask probing questions so that they'll tell you what their business problems are. All you need to do is listen for the business problem for which you can provide a legal solution.

I do not recommend that you make any cold calls. Instead you should find someone who has some legal work that you would like to do, but for whom you are not doing any work right now. I don't know any lawyers who enjoy making cold calls, and I don't know anyone else who likes getting them. So don't make cold calls. The path to new business is paved with your existing relationships.

For more on this topic, call:

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