

THE RAINMAKER WITHIN

Associates Can Contribute More to Client Development Than They May Think

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IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPETITIVE MARKET for legal services, law firms are pulling out all the stops to enhance client-development efforts. For some firms, that means enlisting associates to make a difference.

Yes, associates.

"Firms that have client teams are putting associates in the mix because they play a vital role," says Jan Anne Dubin, noting that this group includes her own law firm. She is director of client relations for 3,100-attorney DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary, working in the Chicago office.

A few law firms are even giving associates a leading role in client development.

"What we've found is that they are the secret weapon—they unlock the market for you," says Rick Davis of the associates at his Texas firm, Hughes & Luce. A former legal consultant, Davis is now chief marketing officer for the 150-attorney business law firm, working from its Dallas office.

Associates are central to the firm's marketing campaigns for two major reasons, Davis says. First, associates tend to have a flexible, energetic attitude about learning legal marketing skills. And second, associates usually have more contacts among lower-level corporate employees, who are crucial to the way the firm approaches its marketing efforts.

The firm teaches associates to use these company contacts—called "coaches"—to learn all about the businesses for which the coaches work. Then, using this inside perspective, a partner-associate team develops an individualized client-focused "pursuit path" to use when approaching that company for business development.

A traditional law firm marketing pitch seeks to sell a potential client on the firm's capabilities. Davis instead recommends an approach that focuses on how a company's relationship with the firm can enhance the prospect's specific business.

"It's more about them than it is about us," he says. "And that's a very important change." And when company managers see that the firm already understands and cares about their business, he notes, they are much more inclined to seek the firm's help on legal matters.

"It's not highly complex," Davis says. "It just works."



Rick Davis: Associates are a "secret weapon—they unlock the market for you."

But associates—and even fledgling solo practitioners—who don't work for a firm with a formal training program in marketing can still learn the skills they need to bring in legal business. No matter how big or small the law firm, the basic principles of business development apply.

Succinctly put, a common recommended approach can be described in a single sentence: "Start early, develop a network and find a mentor that works for you," says Mark Beese, director of marketing at Denver-based Holland & Hart. The firm, which has more than 350 lawyers, has offices in six Western states and Washington, D.C.

Potential clients want lawyers who listen to them and understand their business. So the basic rule of successfully marketing legal services is to "stop talking about yourself and ask questions of other people," Beese explains. "It's not all about you."

TAPPING INTO EXPERIENCE

KEY TO DEVELOPING YOUR MARKETING SKILLS IS TO WATCH an experienced rainmaker in action, Beese and others say.

A good mentor will take the associate along for meetings with prospective and current clients, says Peter M. Ellis, a senior associate in Piper Rudnick's Chicago office. His best training was "watching senior attorneys, whether young partners or more seasoned partners, go out, develop business and cultivate that business." To get results, "it's not just about bringing in business; it's 'How do I make these contacts into a relationship?'" he says.

To find a mentor, Ellis recommends that an associate let rainmakers know that he or she is eager to learn about business development. "I don't believe that enough associates express an interest in client development," he

says. "Oftentimes, they will just sit back and wait for the partners to feed them, to provide their work on a day-to-day basis."

Specifically, an associate might stop by a partner's office to talk or offer to take a partner to lunch, Ellis says. In addition to letting partners know they are interested in client development, associates should ask partners for advice about some of the things they are thinking about doing to promote business, he suggests.

Although it's very important to have a mentor, the mentor doesn't necessarily have to be an attorney at the firm where the associate works, Dubin adds. She also recommends, rather than having a single mentor, that an associate develop a "personal board of directors" composed of "a number of people who have strengths that you admire."

STRIKING UP A CONVERSATION

WHEN SEASONED PARTNERS ARE MARKETING themselves, they can rely on significant expertise in their specific practice area. Since associates are still developing legal expertise, they will need to present themselves to clients a bit differently. Simply striking up a conversation that is enjoyable for the prospect is a good start.

"Companies hire lawyers, as opposed to law firms," Ellis says. "I know it sounds simple, but people need to like you first. And they need to want to help you develop, especially as a junior lawyer."

What exactly should the associate say in a conversation with a potential client? That varies, Ellis says. "I think talking to a client is like any beginning to an important relationship. There is no script. What you say to one person may not work in the next situation. So, if you go in with a script, you're destined to fail."

Once an associate makes an initial connection with a prospective client, that's only the beginning of the business development process. "You've got to stay on their radar, and that's the follow-up," Ellis says. "That's sending the e-mail; that's the 'Hey, I've got some extra tickets to the ballgame. I'd love to take you and some of your colleagues out.' And, of

course, following the market developments in the client's business."

Associates need to keep in mind, too, that making rain requires more than just people skills and practice area expertise. It's especially important for associates developing their own marketing programs to understand the ethical boundaries of business development.

If there is doubt about whether an

approach would be appropriate, firm partners—or, for those in solo practice, colleagues or bar association hotlines—should be consulted for ethical advice, say marketing experts.

It's all part of being in the business of providing a solution and a service to clients, Dubin says. "At the end of the day, firms can have programs. But it's up to each individual to seek out others to help them in the process." ■



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