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CEO, Fishman Marketing

5 Business Development Basics for Associates

The idea of bringing in clients can be daunting for younger lawyers. Secretly, most associates seem to feel that success in this area is either unlikely or impossible.

Most lawyers want to have their own clients, but looking ahead 10 or 20 years, few see a clear roadmap to success.

The specifics are where it gets complicated. There's a lot of advice out there. Candidly, much of it is terrible. Some of it makes sense in theory but doesn't work in practice. Of course, associates are rarely able to judge which is which. By the time they figured it out, they've squandered the years they should have been building the infrastructure for their future success.

Can you imagine spending a decade doing the wrong things without realizing it? Most lawyers never really figure out the *right* things; they just do a lot of different wrong things, or a few wrong things for a long time, then quit in frustration. They simply think that they must not be marketers, rather than understanding that they've been implementing a flawed plan. It's our job to give them useful advice and help aim them in the right direction.

DRIP, DRIP, DRIP — THAT'S ALL MARKETING IS

Developing business isn't especially complicated. In part, it's a numbers game: do the right things and enough of them that they gradually and systematically build and develop their personal network and reputation.

Plan, prepare and execute. Steadily, over time. A little bit every week. Just make sure the things they are doing are the *right* things.

I've trained tens of thousands of lawyers and helped thousands of associates prepare for partnership, or at least for getting clients. What have I learned?

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That today's associates know the game. They've heard gray-haired seasoned attorneys assure them that "law is a profession, not a business" and "doing good work is the best marketing." But Millennials know better; they know that your competitors are also doing darn good work. They learned it's a business the hard way when smart, skilled, hard-working but generic or fungible associates got fired unceremoniously in the recession. Or when friends had their big-firm job offers withdrawn because there wasn't enough business to go around — no hard feelings; it's just business.

Today's associates are hardworking, smart and adaptable. They know not to rely on the firm's loyalty to feed them forever. They're industrious and impatient. They want to control their own destiny. Good for them.

So, what should they do?

FIVE-STEP MARKETING PLAN FOR ASSOCIATES

Here's the basic outline of an associate marketing program. These five basic steps will help associates build a sizable network of relationships, and a personal brand for something that clients will want to hire you to do.

1. In the first two to three years, they must learn to be a great lawyer, emphasizing both technical skills and client service. Help them build their long-term marketing infrastructure, the social media platform and other tools they'll leverage through partnership.
2. Encourage them to join a local bar association, meet their peers, learn the profession, build their résumé by joining a committee, get active, and work toward a leadership position on a small, relevant committee. Build both their personal and professional networks.
3. Gradually, as they grow into midlevel associates, they can start to add more external marketing and networking activities. Get them out of the office. Teach them not to eat lunch at their desks.
4. Around year four or five, they should start to develop a specialty niche or industry expertise in an area they enjoy. We can't let them become one more generic generalist. We want them to offer more, both to the firm and its clients and prospects. Help them find something they're passionate about to focus on, something narrower than "commercial real estate" or "complex business litigation." Not "transportation law," but "interstate transportation

of infectious biological material." Once they have that narrow specialty in mind, then it's easier for them to determine what to write, speak and network about to help them become market leaders. They'll finally know whom to network with and how to build their personal brands. This is critical.

5. As they get more experienced, they should spend more time out of the office with prospects and referrals. If they've accomplished step 4 above, they'll have: A) something to sell beyond "I'm a smart, service-oriented lawyer" (precisely like hundreds or thousands of look-alike lawyers in your community); and B) hundreds of interested prospects. They'll stand out in a positive, client-oriented way.

That's the big overview. The niche practice is the silver bullet, the special sauce. They *might* develop business otherwise — many lawyers do — but their chances are exponentially greater if they offer a unique specialty. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ross Fishman, JD, specializes in branding, websites and marketing training for law firms. A former litigator, marketing director and marketing partner, he has helped hundreds of firms dominate their markets. Fishman was the first inductee into the Legal Marketing Association's Hall of Fame. He's written two books on branding and associate marketing, both available on Amazon.



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