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Taking Your Book of Business From Pamphlet to Novel

BY JOSEPH R. WILLIAMS

Special to the Legal

As a new crop of lawyers receive their successful bar exam results this fall, they will focus on the obvious — finally putting that law degree to use with a steady paying job. The end goal is not, however, to simply obtain a job and collect a paycheck. Young lawyers dream of that particular kind of success that might not come for decades — being called “senior partner” or “attorney general” or maybe even “your honor.”

For those, like me, who focus on the success that can come out of private practice, you will find there is more to reaching your goal than billing hours and winning arguments. In fact, all of the big-wigs that I have talked to (and trust me, I am not shy) have given me one consistent piece of advice: Build your own book of business. “When people start referring to you as the go-to guy,” they tell me, it allows you to become a leader in your firm and the legal community. For many, it allows them to be their own boss or, at the very least, write their own ticket.

There are many different ways to market yourself and your skills and generate business for your practice. Although my own practice still has plenty of room for growth, here are the top 10 guidelines that I subscribe to. I’ll let you know how it turns out.

1. Start on day one.

When I passed the bar exam, I immediately started going to any and all events where networking was possible. After a few months, however, I had not gained a single client. Not one. Thankfully, I didn’t give up. It takes time to build rapport. The connections



JOSEPH R. WILLIAMS

is an associate attorney at Pollock Begg Komar Glasser & Vertz in Pittsburgh. He is the chair-elect of the Allegheny County Bar Association young lawyers division and one of The Legal’s 2013 Lawyers on the Fast Track.

I made initially have stuck with me and many of the people who I met early on have since referred me cases and recommended me for positions within the bar association. Many have become individuals to whom I also refer work. Many have also become good friends.

2. Classmates are more than just faces in the yearbook.

Although I chose Pittsburgh as the place where I wanted to practice law, I was not originally from the area and didn’t have the home field advantage. But neither did many of my law school classmates. I have worked diligently to continue the friendships I made in law school and have even built on relationships with individuals I barely knew in law school. They are now some of my best referral sources (most do not want to touch divorce work with a nine-foot pole). Likewise, some college classmates who are now working locally as social workers, medical professionals and bankers have called on me to help a friend or one of their own clients.

3. Other lawyers are your friends, too.

Without a doubt, the group that I can consistently count on to send me work is my network of other lawyers. Through

the bar association and other legal organizations, you can make connections with lawyers in other practice areas who will get calls from a prospective client in your practice area, not theirs. Also, by establishing relationships within your own area of focus, you can pick up referrals when others cannot take the case because of a conflict of interest, cost factors or other circumstances. Also, never underestimate the power of court reporters, court employees and legal assistants. They see and hear more than you know and are often called upon for a recommendation as well.

4. You are always marketing (at least you should be).

Referrals come in all different packaging. The way you conduct yourself in the courtroom, during settlement negotiations and at social functions all leads to how you are perceived in your field. By carrying yourself as a professional from the outset, you will convey to others that you are a devoted and serious professional who gives client matters the utmost attention. At the same time, people like to refer to someone they can relate to, so it is important to be yourself and not be afraid to show your personality when you are at an after-work happy hour or playing soccer in the bar association league.

5. Go to lunch even if you are not hungry.

This one isn’t 100 percent on point for me because I am always hungry. I do, however, frequently go out of the office for a cup of coffee even though I hate the taste of it. The point is that as a young lawyer, you should take every opportunity you can to make professional connections. I try to go to at least

one lunch, happy hour or coffee break a week with potential referral sources. While the restaurant might not be my favorite, it is an easy way to spend an hour letting people know about yourself, your firm and how you might be able to assist them or their contacts with a matter in your industry. On the lunch, you might also run into a referral source who you met using tips two, three and four and trigger his or her memory that you do a certain kind of work. Don't forget the old adage: Out of sight, out of mind.

6. The little fish know the big fish.

Being a young lawyer, you aren't going to start off getting the wealthiest clients with the most complex issues in the courthouse, but you might one day. The client you help today with a small case might refer you the client with a medium case who refers you a client with the big case. Don't hold yourself out as a lawyer who only looks for the biggest case in town. Make sure your referral sources know that you help all walks of life and are happy to do so.

7. Do quality work for the clients you already have.

Many believe that this is the best form of networking there is. Consumers rely on advertising, websites and social media to obtain information about a professional. While those things are all important forms of marketing, the best endorsement you can receive is the word of a satisfied client who can personally speak to the manner in which you handled his or her case. By the same token, if you do not show your existing clients that you are giving their matters the utmost diligence and attention,

a dissatisfied client can negate all of the other work that you are doing to sell yourself and your skills.

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8. Today's favor is tomorrow's referral.

Early on in your career, do not get too caught up in the amount of your retainers and the hours billed on your cases. Those things will come over time. You can secure many lifelong referral sources by helping them out now when a new client is not on the line. Many times, I receive calls from colleagues who do not focus on my practice area and have general or procedural questions for a friend or family member who is going through a difficult situation. After helping them out, I often receive a sign of appreciation in the form of a referral from that individual when the situation rises into more than just a casual inquiry and requires the assistance of an expert in the area. With this tip, I do caution you to be careful not to get caught up in running a free clinic; your time is valuable and you can choose how or to whom you give it.

9. Interest in others leads to an interest in you.

It's often not enough to keep former classmates in mind and to go to lunch with potential referral sources. You should put an effort into strengthening those relationships. Send congratulatory notes when these individuals obtain new jobs or positions, receive awards or honors, or even celebrate the birth of a child or a milestone birthday. They will remember your interest and, in turn, keep you in mind as well.

10. Show your appreciation.

Don't become too satisfied when steps one through nine pay off and you are finally retained on the big type of case you have set your eyes on. You need those referrals to be recurring. Make sure the referral source knows that you are appreciative and remain committed to him or her. Send thank-you letters and emails. Add him or her to your holiday mailing list. Keep him or her informed as to the status of the matter to the extent possible while maintaining your duty of confidentiality and privilege with your client. And since all of these tips are intertwined, be sure to review number seven again. Remember, the best thing you can do to maintain the confidence of the referral source is to perform quality work for the client you have.

Above everything else, keep in mind that you have to play to your strong suits. The product you are selling is yourself and it is important that you feel comfortable in doing so, because ultimately you are the only one who can follow through with delivering the product that you have sold. •

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POLLOCK BEGG KOMAR GLASSER & VERTZ LLC

Joseph R. Williams
jwilliams@pollockbegg.com
412-471-9000
www.pollockbegg.com