



CAREER CONSULT



To Build Your Legal Career, Marketing is Necessary; But Not Sufficient

By [Stephen E. Seckler](#)

When I graduated from law school in 1988, it was evident that the legal profession was undergoing a major shift. To prior generations of attorneys, the law was simply a profession. Passing the bar, joining a good firm and doing good work were enough to insure some measure of career success. Finding clients was not considered an issue because the reputation of the firm would continue to generate work all by itself. Two decades later, no one would dispute the changed reality: the law is still a profession; but it is also a business.

As attorneys and law firms have begun to adopt some of the business practices that accounting firms and other professions have had in place for many years, the change has been slow. Lawyers, as a group, are a conservative bunch (not in the political sense but in the sense that lawyers tend to be cautious about change.) So rather than implementing marketing and sales programs simultaneously, marketing has been the key focus at most law firms.

Initially, firms created brochures, organized educational seminars, sponsored events and purchased advertisements. The internet created a whole new publishing medium and by 2000, virtually every major firm had a website listing practice areas and containing attorney biographies.

Law Firms are Beginning to Understand the Limitations of Marketing

But as law firms come to grips with a post "Great Recession" world, many firms are beginning to understand that selling legal services requires both good marketing (establishing a reputation in the marketplace and communicating that reputation effectively to potential buyers and referral sources) as well as effective business development (building trusted relationships with clients, prospective clients and referral sources.) Simply put, law firms are learning that effective selling must involve two-way communication. While it is important to promote your reputation, it is not enough.

So what does this mean for your career as a lawyer?

If you are in private practice, the ability to generate business is very important. Having your

own clients (or some demonstrated ability to bring in client work), is generally a factor in partnership decisions. In addition, having portable billings can give you a lot more flexibility if you conclude that your present firm is no longer a good fit.

For many associates, marketing is a good place to get started. Drafting client alerts or writing articles is a way to get yourself “known” and involves less risk taking. In addition, speaking at and participating in bar association activities which build your reputation in your practice area are also good ideas.

Traditional media also has a role to play in helping you to foster a reputation in a particular community (i.e. publishing by-lined articles or getting quoted); and social media provides many new channels for distributing your content.

Marketing is Not Enough, But it is Where Many Lawyers Feel Comfortable

While marketing is necessary in selling legal services, it is not sufficient. Fundamentally, marketing is a one way street. You craft a message and distribute it to the individuals you would like to influence (either directly, through the media or through social media.) But until you get out of the office and interact with the real world, you are unlikely to be successful in building a law practice.

Since many marketing activities are like the practice of law (i.e. they mostly involve working quietly in your office to craft the message), most lawyers feel comfortable getting started with these activities.

There is More Risk Taking in Business Development

Business development (or relationship building), requires you to meet business prospects in person and take risks. It demands that you be open to the serendipity of human interactions and know how to cultivate opportunities when they present themselves. It is more spontaneous and less scripted than most marketing.

Thinking about relationship building pushes many lawyers to the edge of their comfort zone; but in order to be successful in building a practice, attorneys need to push themselves to get beyond traditional marketing.

Many lawyers I coach are uncomfortable with relationship building because they do not want to come across as a salesperson. While effective relationship building is beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that lawyers actually have a lot of natural skills that are useful in relationship building. If you are good at asking questions, listening carefully to the answers and following through on your promises, you will get clues about how to effectively deepen your business relationships. In other words, the good news for lawyers who don't want to come across as a salesperson is that doing so is ineffective.

Conclusion

There are many career benefits to having your own clients in the practice of law. To effectively build up a base of clients can take years. Marketing is a critical component of creating a good reputation; but make sure to incorporate good relationship building activities into your marketing plan. Without good relationships, you may have a good reputation, but that alone is not enough to build a robust law practice.

Stephen Seckler is president of [Seckler Legal Coaching](#). Previously, he was managing director of the Boston office of BCG Attorney Search, a national recruiting firm. He writes the blog [CounseltoCounsel](#) which was included in the American Bar Association Journal's Blawg100 in 2007 and 2008. He can be contacted at legal@seckler.com.
