

HOW TO START A PRACTICE

What Do I Do Next?

These days, we are unfortunately inundated with news of layoffs in the professions. This is a difficult time, fraught with anxiety and even fear. We are inundated, as well, with an overwhelming array of advice, which, like all advice, is only worthwhile if it fits one's personal abilities or predilections.

We have, now, literally thousands of lawyers and accountants looking for guidance through a very dark night. Most, of course, are job hunting, and the advice in that category has filled books with stuff that sometimes works, but not always. There are those who are frozen in the headlights. It seems incomprehensible that after all that education and training that there are no jobs in this wide world.

Then there are the entrepreneurial lawyers and accountants who see this situation as an opportunity to start up on their own. These are the brave and hardy ones who remember that every one of the AMLAW 100 and Big Four accounting firms started out as solos or partnerships of a few other hardy souls, which is a message that should help sustain all startups.

Every legal and accounting publication – in hard copy or on the internet -- is loaded with advice about how to start a practice. But what seems to be missing is realistic guidance on the practice – the practice, not the theory – of practice development. Not what you should do, but what you could do.

Some of it is obvious. Hit on your relatives, friends, and former colleagues who are still working. Talk to the placement people at your law school. Network. Network? How?

Join organizations. You've no doubt already thought of that. But which ones? Here's the trick.

- Even though you may be envisioning a general practice, start with a specialty. There are several ways to look at that. You may not want to choose real estate, because everybody knows that's one of the specialties that got us into this mess. On the other hand, real estate professionals and investors can well be the ones who most need your services, but can't afford the big firms. Bankruptcy, estate planning, any field that you can serve for the smaller client. It doesn't matter. Just choose wisely. The important thing is that as a specialist, you have a better chance to compete than if you start out as a generalist. In the minds of today's consumers of services, and in an increasingly complex world, the generalist is the last person in the world people go to when they need a lawyer or an accountant. And this

includes both the need for specialized advice, and the need for someone who is conversant with the intricacies of specific industries.

- Remember that all you're after at the beginning is the first client or two. When that happens, you're in business, and you can grow from there.
- Find an organization that either serves the prospective client you're after, or has members that might be active or influential in the clientele you're after. If there are still bankers left in the world, find an organization that has a few as members. They know where the clients are.
- After you've joined the appropriate organization, get active. Attend meetings. Make friends, and be visible. Volunteer for committees. You might even find becoming an officer is helpful.
- If the organization is appropriately structured, offer to run seminars in your specialty. Offer to write a column for the organization's newsletter.

It may take some time, but it works. And even if you do get a job, your contacts in your chosen organization will stand you in good stead. More.

- Target. Choose 10 companies or individuals you think should be using your help, and hit them with regular communications, using emails, letters, reprints of interesting articles about the sort of problems you may perceive their having that you can solve. Become ubiquitous in their awareness of you and your understanding of their industry, their companies, their legal or accounting problems. Start with a few prospects in a few industries in which you can claim expertise and understanding of the problems.
- Important. Remember that few people hire lawyers or accountants from a letter or an ad. Your objective in these communications, then, is not to get a client, but to gain personal access so that you can make a personal presentation. If you recognize this, you measure your success in the number of people you get to see face to face. That's where the selling begins. And that's how it works to get clients.
- When you reach a point at which you think you've penetrated their consciousness, call for an appointment.
- The operative word in this approach is you, not I. The focus is not what you have to sell, but on what they need to buy from you.
- Always stress the problem or the danger. Then you can talk about how you can help solve it.
- The trick in using direct mail is to start with the four-paragraph letter.

- Paragraph one states a specific problem – not as an obvious statement, but as a warning of danger
 - Paragraph two says “I can help.
 - Paragraph three says “This is who I am” – briefly.
 - Paragraph four says, “I’ll call you Monday.”
- Never start a direct mail letter or email with a question, to which a “No” answer means they don’t have to read the rest of the communication.
 - These rules apply, as well, to emails to prospects.

Another technique that may be appropriate for you is to capitalize on current events that are appropriate to your specialty. A new law or ruling, for example, gives you an opportunity to call or drop a note to the local newspaper and offer to give a professional interpretation for their readers. If they publish what you say, then a reprint goes to every one of your prospective clients, with a little cover note.

Advertising would seem obvious, but most of it is expensive, and for greater return on the investment, requires professional help. Advertising looks easy, but as many a professional has discovered, it isn’t. And even the major firms, using professional help, too often get it wrong.

Every one of these techniques is useful, whether you’re starting out or have an established practice you want to expand. But if you’re just starting a practice, these are relatively simple things you can do, without a vast expenditure, without the aid of outside marketing help. Relatively simple is important in the early stages of starting a practice. Unless you have unlimited resources, focus on a few prospects at a time, offering a few relevant services. In a startup practice, you’re after one client at a time. The first one you get is the charm that leads you to the next one – and the one after that.

One last point. Forget that law and accounting firms are a business, and one that competes against other firms. If you’re planning on starting your own firm tomorrow morning, spend today thinking competitively.

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