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Think Like a Client to Grow a Healthy Practice

By Kimberly Alford Rice

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You won't always be the low man on the totem pole. One day, you will have clients of your own, IF you really want to.

With so much emphasis placed on research, document review, and shadowing occurring in the first years of a lawyer's career, it is imperative for the lawyer to take the initiative to increase her exposure and interaction with clients. Often, young lawyers hear their supervisors say they should focus primarily on doing "good work". In other words, the last thing they would want you to do is to spend time building relationships with clients and potential clients. That thinking works until the economy tanks and those firms lay off associates and income partners who "just do good work."

Clearly, there is a disconnect between what is taught in law school and what is expected in law practice. With little or no emphasis on building relationships with clients (new and prospective), it is no wonder that lawyers are unsure how to actually attract new clients. The "best" way - - begin to think like a client. Here are a few tips:

- Put yourself in clients' shoes - - they have budgets to meet, business problems to solve, create a plan of how you can make their lives easier in your current situation. Take the initiative and propose to a responsible partner an "off-the-clock" meeting with a client to better understand their struggles.
- Bone up on your interpersonal and relationship building skills. Survey top partners in your firm to learn how clients select their lawyers and what is most important to them.
- Observe and learn how more senior attorneys in your firm interact with clients. Take note of the thought-provoking, open-ended questions they ask to signal to clients that they are genuinely interested in the client's issues and business.
- Take special care to learn to actively listen to others. This skill is so key to fostering solid relationships and developing better relationship-building skills. It is essential in developing trust and rapport.

- Lobby for your firm to train associates in client development skills to kick start an institutional approach to building a book of business. Studies show that when associates have the opportunity to learn client development skills, they are more energized about their billable work. They also appreciate that their firm has invested in them. Many associates I have coached have become partners in their firms and they are passing down what they have learned to the young associates in their offices.
- The worst action you can take is **no** action. Get out from behind your desk, get out among business professionals, and take charge of your career.