



## **10 Actions Every Lawyer Should Take in 2009**

### **By: Allison C. Shields**

Here we are, at the end of another year, and about to begin a new one. Even if this year didn't exactly turn out the way you'd planned, 2009 can be better. Here are 10 things I think every lawyer should do in 2009 to improve their practice:

1. **Add something to your services.** We all know it's tough out there. The more indispensable you are to your clients, the more difficult it will be to replace you. Give your clients more value by providing them with extra services. They can be anything from password protected extranets to automatic email alerts about their case, a free document review or update, or something completely unexpected.

2. **Eliminate your worst clients.** You know which ones I mean - the ones that don't listen to you, don't respect you and/or don't pay you. You're not obligated to work for free, and clients that don't take your advice, don't cooperate, aren't honest with you or don't pay you create conflicts and take you away from your best clients. Change your retainer agreement if you have to, make a motion to the court to be relieved if you must, but get out of client relationships that suck you dry.

3. **Educate your clients.** You know the legal process, but your clients don't. Most clients can't absorb everything you tell them during an initial consultation and they may need some reassurance and reminding along the way. Make it as easy and painless as possible for your clients by providing them with information, not just orally, but in written form, too. Give them some materials to refer to. Provide visual aids like flowcharts or diagrams where appropriate. Write a list of frequently asked questions and answers and post them on your website and provide clients with hard copies.

4. **Visit your clients and former clients.** Schedule time in your calendar NOW to visit clients and former clients in the new year. Make it a habit to visit clients periodically. One of my best law firm clients is constantly amazed every time he travels to visit clients - they almost always tell them that *no other lawyer they've ever worked with before has taken the time to visit them*. Visit your clients sets you apart. Take some time, visit your clients, take them to lunch, dinner, coffee or drinks. Bring breakfast to their office for their staff. Get to know them. You'll strengthen your relationship. Strong relationships lead to business.

5. **Increase productivity and effectiveness.** In these tough economic times, it's more important than ever to be sure that you're focusing your time on the highest value tasks and eliminating or

delegating lower value tasks - even if that means outsourcing. With digital dictation, virtual assistants and all kinds of outsourced services available, there's no reason you have to wear every hat in the business.

6. **Beef up your online presence.** Like it or not, business is being done on the internet, and the more visible you are online, the larger your pool of potential prospects. Make sure that your website is easy to navigate, provides relevant information and presents a professional image of you and your firm. If you haven't gotten into social networking, make it a priority in 2009. There are lots of options, from LinkedIn and Twitter to list-serves, Avvo, Justia, JDSupra and more. Even if your business is purely local, most prospects will go to the internet to do their research about you. Make sure you've got an online presence you can be proud of.

7. **Tighten up your firm's financial picture.** Cash flow is key. Make sure you're sending your clients the right signals about fees and payment. Don't focus strictly on price when speaking with prospective clients or referral sources. If you sell yourself as the lowest price lawyer you'll get clients with a roving eye who are always looking for a lower priced service. Focus on the value you can provide clients and the benefits they'll receive from working with you. Consider alternative billing arrangements that allow clients to budget for your services and pay up front. Send bills out timely and don't let unpaid bills pile up. Check into the possibility of taking credit cards as payment.

8. **Get out of your office and meet people.** You never know where business is going to come from, or when. But it's far less likely to come if you're holed up in your office day and night. Remember, "it's not what you know, it's who you know." Make new connections and strengthen the old.

9. **Make an investment in your practice.** Now is not the time to cut business development to the bone or make do with inefficient systems. In fact, the opposite is true. It's more important than ever to establish yourself as an authority in your field, to market your services and to provide those services efficiently and effectively. Don't assume that your clients are aware of all of the services that you provide. Spend time cross-selling your services and remind existing and former clients that you're there to help them.

10. **Learn to use what you already have.** The newest programs and gadgets may be cool, but if you're trying to save money, provide clients with an outstanding experience and increase your productivity, you probably already have tools right under your nose that you aren't using to their full advantage. Outlook, Word, WordPerfect, PowerPoint, Excel, Adobe Acrobat, your case management program and your time and billing programs are just some of the programs that you probably already have at your disposal. If you're like most lawyers, you don't use a fraction of the features and functions of those programs, and you probably don't even know they exist. This year, pick a program or tool you already have and make a point of learning how to use that item well - read a book, do an online tutorial or hire an expert to provide training.

Want to improve your firm but don't know how? Know what you want, but can't find a way to get it done? [Contact me](#) to see how I can help.



*Allison C. Shields, Esq., President of Legal Ease Consulting, Inc. helps lawyers create more productive, profitable and enjoyable law practices by providing practice management and business development coaching and consulting. Visit her blog at [www.LegalEaseConsulting.com](http://www.LegalEaseConsulting.com) or her website at [www.LawyerMeltdown.com](http://www.LawyerMeltdown.com). Contact her at: [Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com](mailto:Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com).*