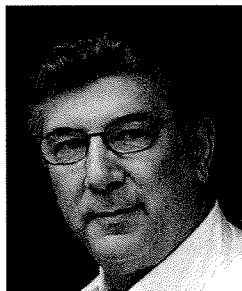


Marketing and Business Development for Senior Associates

By Alana K. Bassin and Allan Colman



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It was a rather telling comment, coming as it did from the managing partner of a large New York law firm. When asked if his firm provides marketing or business development training for associates, he said, “Why would we do that? Most of these people aren’t going to make partner. Why should we help them develop business that they’ll take someplace else?”

To be sure, you can’t get a better read on a firm’s culture than by how they perceive associates in this context. Are associates a part of the firm’s real growth prospectus or only timekeepers? Does the firm actually care about their future in the organization, or is it assumed they’re only passing through? Will they be made partner but without any honest preparation for the hard realities of client relations and revenue generation that partners must confront?

Fortunately, the New York firm described above may be a dinosaur. Even in much better economies, professional service organizations face such pressures to increase revenue that they simply cannot afford to waste human resources that

are already at hand, especially senior professionals who may be future partners in the enterprise.

Today, more law firms understand that they must be total sales cultures, which by definition involves the total professional population. A house divided—between partners who are required to sell and non-partners who are not empowered to—may stand for a while, but it cannot grow.

For senior associates, the issue is especially urgent. One of two events is about to happen: They either will be named partner or they won’t be. Either way, marketing and business development training is a matter of supreme self-interest. As partners, they will be evaluated and compensated by how they make rain. Alternatively, they need these rainmaking skills to prosper elsewhere.

For law firms, marketing training is thus a recruitment asset and a retention tool. The key is to ensure that the training is practical—not just bromides, but specific action steps lawyers can take to compete and win.

Importantly, the training agenda should be bifurcated. Half of it is about getting found; this is called marketing. The other half is about getting chosen; this is called sales. The skills are interrelated but different, and senior associates need to be extremely good at both.

Positioning to Complete

Novices tend to panic. They don’t know where to begin. They see themselves as failing if initial efforts don’t immediately pay off. They need to understand that marketing is a methodical art and that it happens on a step-by-step basis. They need to understand each separate step as part of a larger programmatic initiative.

As such, the first important training goal is to help lawyers develop a comfort level with the process as a whole. And the way to do that is by enumerating individual tasks that are singularly manageable and often enjoyable. Among them:

- Attend CLE and bar events. Get to know lawyers from other firms and jurisdictions; they can be great referral sources. If in-house attorneys are on a panel, ask a question or offer a comment. Introduce yourself when the event is over and request a business card. You’ve already distinguished yourself by showing interest in what they worked hard to present. No doubt they will be grateful for that interest and will respond accordingly.
- Don’t just attend events; get involved with the sponsoring committee. Because organizations want and need volunteers, the relationship is mutually beneficial.
- Memorize an “elevator speech”: what you do, why your work is valuable, and why people hire you. Learn to deliver the speech conversationally. Just because it’s memorized doesn’t mean it has to sound memorized.
- Enrich your résumé. It may be hard to land a speaking engagement early on, but there is a big demand for articles. Most publications are open to senior associates, not just partners. Once the article is published, merchandise it in somewhat different form to another outlet. Post it with your bio on the firm’s website. In other words, leverage it to the hilt.
- Expand your contact list. Reconnect with colleagues from law school or even earlier. Some of them may be working in-house. Others may own businesses. Ask for their input on substantive professional issues. Provide a contact list to the marketing department.
- Remember that job performance is a key part of marketing. Be more than competent; be “a pleasure to work with.” Your coworkers may not be at the firm forever. Some of them can become clients. Others can become referral sources.

- Look for opportunities to help colleagues at the firm develop business. They're likely to return the favor. Such "cross-selling" requires that you be attentive to in-house contacts who may not manage the kind of work you do, but who could be useful to other lawyers at the firm.
- Write lists and set deadlines. Prioritize your tasks and try to accomplish at least one task every week.

The impact of such curricula is to demystify marketing for associates. It's a practical agenda with specific steps any committed professional can take—simple enough steps, perhaps, to deprive lawyers of excuses for inaction.

Positioning to Win

The second part of the training program should address how to actually get the work, i.e., how to close. These skills are not quite as straightforward as all the diligent "to-dos" of superior marketing that we have itemized. In fact, the challenges of face-to-face selling—of asking for the business and getting it—are likely a lot more daunting to associates.

As part of their training, associates should understand that, while there are indeed "naturals" who succeed without seeming to raise a sweat, the rules of this game can also be learned and effectively

applied as well. Among the teachable precepts:

- Identify the final decision-maker on the work at stake. It may not be in-house counsel.
- Identify the pressures that buyers face from the CEO or board of directors to meet budgetary limitations, win more cases, or provide intensified compliance counsel. Responding to these pressures helps you build relationships even in the heat of the selling moment.
- Develop a broader understanding of prospective clients. What new products or services have they recently marketed? Are they reducing staff? Are they merging, acquiring, or being acquired? Always focus on them, not on yourself. They simply don't care about what law school you attended. An old IBM selling precept is the 60/40 rule, with the client talking about 60 percent of the time. Good questions sell better than good answers.
- Start with a value proposition: "Here's what I can do for you. Here's a general sense of how we're going to get there. I look forward to discussing the details."

- Give something away: for example, free advice on how the case can be won or the transaction can be completed. It gives the buyer a real sense of what it's like to work with you. There's also a powerful inertia at work. Once buyers start talking strategy with you, it's easier for them to continue doing so rather than start all over with somebody else.
- Underscore accountability. Talk as much about regular meetings and progress reports as you do about case strategy. By doing so, you directly address the deep need of clients to work with people they trust.

Such rules of selling and closing are second nature for the most successful senior partners in the profession. Yet there's no guarantee of success under any circumstances—not for them and certainly not for senior associates struggling to master this delicate new art.

The name of the game is best effort—by lawyers endeavoring to make rain and by law firms that are committed to helping them learn to do so. ●

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