

Asking for Referrals, The Easiest Way to Generate More Business

By Chuck Polin & Evan Polin

In an interesting contradiction, the number one technique to generate more new files is also the concept that makes attorneys the most uncomfortable. Throughout the years, numerous studies have shown that the most effective way for attorneys to develop more business is through referrals, specifically referrals from other attorneys. Typically, referrals come from three sources: (1) other attorneys (2) strategic partners and (3) current clients. Let's begin by exploring some of the beliefs that attorneys hold that keep them from asking for referrals.

1. Other people should know I am a good attorney and should give me new files or matters when they arise.

We would all like to believe that our contacts are always thinking about us, but that is almost never the case. Most people are constantly tuned into the same radio station, WIIFM or "what's in it for me". Think about how busy you are in your day-to-day life and think about how often you think of referrals for other people. If you want to receive referrals, you will need to remind people that you are available and you must be able to ask for the business.

2. People will think I'm desperate if I ask for business.

Most of the attorneys we have met have a "self-limiting recording" in which they believe their peers and clients will think less of them if they "ask for the business". When attorneys ask for referrals, they are often surprised by how much their peers want to help them. When we ask our clients, "what would happen if someone they knew and respected asked them for referrals," they always say that they would do whatever they could to help a client or contact. Why would things be different for you? Our clients are always surprised at how easy it is to ask for referrals when we teach them the most effective way to do it.

3. I have nothing to offer in return.

Many times we find that attorneys don't ask for referrals because they are afraid that they have nothing to offer in return. Attorneys from small to medium size firms sometimes are not sure how they could help a larger firm. Sometimes, attorneys are afraid to develop referral relationships with strategic partners because they're not sure what they can offer in return. People are often surprised when they discover that the referring party's only expectation is that their client or friends receive the best representation. When you ask for referrals, the other party typically asks for less in return than you would think.

4. My clients only want me to work on the work.

Some attorneys believe that their clients think they should never have other clients. When attorneys ask for referrals their clients often want to help them and they will do this by referring them to others.

Before we talk about how to ask for referrals you need to ask yourself, "What will it take for me to overcome my fears or discomfort about asking for referrals?" Our clients have found that they cannot overcome years of self-limiting records regarding referrals in a week or two. They must move outside of their "comfort zone" and constantly work on

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behaviors to overcome the limiting records listed above. Here are some ways to overcome your reluctance to ask for referrals

1. Start with a low risk situation. Don't ask for a referral from your biggest client the first time you decide to ask. Start with a long-term client who has a stake in your success, or start with a friend or strategic partner.

2. Don't put pressure on the person you approach. Let your client or referral partner know that it is ok if they can't think of someone to refer. You don't want to jeopardize a relationship when you ask for a referral.

3. Start by asking how you might be able to help the person you are approaching. You may find that people are not expecting as much in return as you fear.

Now that we have determined that it is important to ask for referrals, how do you ask without offending or being seen as too pushy?

1. Develop a list of ideal clients or specific types of clients that you would like to pursue. It is difficult to successfully ask for, and receive, referrals if you can't specify the type of clients you want to work with and the kind of problems that you can solve.

2. Identify natural referral sources for you and your practice. Make a list of who to contact for referrals. Are there other attorneys or law firms who are a good fit for you? Perhaps there are firms who don't practice in the same areas that you do and there is potential for mutual referrals. Maybe other firms

have conflict work that can be referred to you.

Maybe there are firms who come across opportunities that are too small or too large and they need to pass them on. Look for relationships from contacts from law school, your local bar association, or previous employers.

3. Identify strategic alliances that can lead to business. A strategic partner is someone from a complementary profession who can lead you to business and who you can lead to new business. Examples may be accountants, financial advisors, professional consultants, trade associations, insurance professionals, or other service providers who serve your client base. A great way to start a relationship like this is to ask the other professional "how can you see us helping each other", then wait for a response. You may be surprised how easy it is to start a mutual referral relationship with a strategic partner.

Once you develop the relationship, track the results. These partnerships only work if they are two-way.

4. When asking clients for referrals, ask how things are going with your current relationship first. You don't want to ask for a referral if your client is not completely satisfied with your relationship. This serves a dual purpose. It allows you to ask for referrals if things are going well, and it allows us to repair a relationship if our client is not satisfied. If someone is not satisfied, we want to identify that before they end the relationship.

5. Don't pressure someone for a referral. When you ask for referrals, you don't want your contacts to feel uncomfortable, or to believe you are desperate. Make sure when you ask for a referral, you always make the referral source feel comfortable and let them know that it's ok if they don't have a referral for you.

6. Follow up with your referral source. If someone gives you a referral, it is your responsibility to follow up and let him or her know how it worked out. Thank your contact for the referral, regardless of the outcome.

The next step is to begin asking for more referrals. It is natural to feel uncomfortable the first few times you ask for a referral. It will take time to overcome some of the self-limiting records that I talked about in this article. If you are still uncomfortable with the idea of asking for referrals, just think about the best case and worst-case scenarios.

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