

I Need to Grow My Practice Base - What Now?

By Chuck Polin & Evan Polin

Our experience working with attorneys and law firms tells us that the pressure to develop new business is on the rise. It is no longer good enough to be an excellent attorney; you are now expected to develop new business as well. Many attorneys that we coach want to develop more business; they are just not sure how to do it, or where they will find the extra time.

Our experience tells us that skilled and well-networked attorneys can utilize several methods to grow their business without taking much time away from billing clients. Some of the methods may initially be a challenge, but if you can move out of your comfort zone and learn some of these new techniques, you will have increased success developing business.

Don't Just Work Hard, Work Smart!!!

For experienced attorneys, the best way to grow their practice is through current clients, contacts, and personal relationships. The most productive way to grow a practice is through your current clients. Who can better speak to the quality of your work better than someone who you have provided services for? We strongly suggest to the attorneys that we train and coach to ask for referrals from their clients. Like most new activities, we find that the attorneys with whom we work are often reluctant to ask for referrals. Many attorneys have the belief that it is unprofessional to ask for referrals and that clients will resent them if they ask. We have also found that many attorneys have the beliefs that if they do good work, referrals will automatically appear. Our experience has been that attorneys need to ask for referrals. Occasionally referrals will happen without asking, but typically our clients are busy and not always thinking about how they can help us. They may also believe that you have more business than you can handle and don't need the additional work. It is for these reasons that we need to proactively ask for referrals.

When taught how to properly ask for referrals and personal introductions, the amount of business you will receive will greatly increase. Before asking for referrals, you need to assess the satisfaction that your client has with you. We suggest that you first have a conversation with your client to gauge their satisfaction with

your work. Ask your clients if there is anything that they were hoping to get from you that they are not currently getting. Is there anything that they feel could be working better? If there are issues that need to be improved upon, it's always better to find out while someone is still a client. If you need to work on something, abort the referral conversation and follow up on what needs to be changed.

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We continue the conversation by letting our client know that we really appreciate their business and that we enjoy working with clients “just like them.” Next, we want to reassure them that our priority is servicing our current clients. The only way that we can spend the majority of our time servicing clients is if, from time to time if clients are happy with our work, they introduce us to someone they know. We then give them ideas of whom we would like to meet (don't assume that your client will know) and ask if they would feel comfortable making an introduction. We want to let our clients know that if they are not comfortable, it's ok. We then want to schedule a time to follow up to see if our client's referral would like to speak with us.

Another way that attorneys have found they have successfully been able to build business through current clients is by up selling. Many of our clients provide great service to their clients, but often they don't provide 100% of the legal services for their clients. In some cases you or your firm may not have the expertise to provide all of the services. In other cases, you or other members of your firm could provide additional legal services for a current

client. If that is the case, you want to approach your client in the same manner that you would approach when asking for a referral. First take a temperature to determine your client's comfort level with the services you provide. Is your client happy with your services; is there anything that needs to be improved? If your client is satisfied, a great question to ask is “what you would you need to see from our firm to give us a chance for some of your other work?” You will be surprised to discover how often you will get more business by simply asking.

Utilize the Resources Within Your Own Firm

For attorneys who work in multi-practice firms, internal marketing can be a great way to generate more billable hours. When we have worked with multi-practice firms in the past, we have found that attorneys in one practice area were rarely aware of the work being done in other practice areas. We also found that attorneys were reluctant to refer work within the firm because they were not comfortable with their colleagues. To overcome these issues, we suggest that clients in multi-practice firms create internal peer groups. Meet regularly with colleagues from other practice areas. Share case studies and become more familiar with the work that is done in other practice areas. Develop relationships and treat your colleagues as well, if not better, than strategic partners. You will be surprised how, over time, you are able to lead your co-workers into current clients and develop additional work for the firm.

Developing additional business for you and your firm does not need to be an all-encompassing task. You can build on your current relationships and the strength of your good work. To be successful developing business, you need to build a plan, and then execute. There are boundless opportunities available, you just need to learn how to take advantage of those opportunities.

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