

# A Roadmap to Global Client Development

BY CHRISTY BURKE

NETWORKING PLAYS A PIVOTAL ROLE FOR ATTORNEYS WHO WISH TO DEVELOP INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES.

In today's Internet age, from strictly a networking standpoint, the world is officially your oyster. Never before has it been so easy for attorneys and other legal professionals to communicate with clients and colleagues from all over the world to attract, develop, and secure international business.

Web sites, blogs, listservs, social networking sites (like Facebook and MySpace), and e-mail — the mother of all communication tools — all facilitate business development. In addition, for attorneys inclined to develop global clientele, the international playing field abounds with thousands of networking organizations and events. Attorneys can leverage their contacts, strengths, expertise, and language proficiencies to establish international clientele, and in doing so can benefit with payment in euros, yen, pesos, and ultimately dollars that result from their efforts.

## SHORTCUT

Never before has it been so easy for attorneys and other legal professionals to communicate with clients and colleagues from around the world to attract, develop, and secure international business.

Consider how many cities, countries, and continents there are in the world. Many of them would benefit from American legal counsel, either personally or professionally. With all these targets, there are seemingly infinite ways to network to generate new business.

Many legal niches already exist worldwide, and many more will be carved out by enterprising and innovative attorneys. For instance, an immigration attorney who speaks two languages in addition to English can mine clients in specific cities or countries and build great word-of-mouth to get referrals. Or, an immigrant with ties to his previous homeland or transplanted communities can capitalize on interesting opportunities. Even if an attorney speaks only English and has never traveled outside of the United States, global opportunities still exist because English is widely spoken by business-people worldwide and most expatriates.

The opportunities for international client development are certainly astounding, but where do attorneys and their law firm colleagues begin?

### **BOLSTER YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE**

Force yourself to take a good look at your firm's Web site. If visiting your URL makes you cringe, it's probably time for a makeover. Having a high-quality Web site that presents your firm well impresses people – and it's available 365/24/7, so it's a constant representation of your firm to the world. If your firm's Web site is outdated, what are people going to conclude about its legal services?

The Internet is the world's encyclopedia. Like it or not, you will be "Googled," and your Internet mentions will either attract or dissuade clients from seeking you out. Try "Google-ing" your name in quotation marks ("John Smith") and see what happens. How do you stack up? Do you appear on the first page, or do you have to scroll through to the 10th page to find your name? Then, when you find yourself, are you featured in a flattering professional capacity, or is the link to a photo of you at a social event or a family reunion?

Are you listed on free directories like LinkedIn and ZoomInfo? Do you have Facebook and MySpace

pages? These free Internet listing opportunities give you excellent online exposure, so when people worldwide are searching the Web for legal representation, your firm and its attorneys are more likely to be on their radar.

Social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook are a great way to propagate business for little cost, other than your time and effort. Solo practitioner Evans Legros practices immigration, real estate, matrimonial, and entertainment law, often working with clients who live outside the United States. Legros has obtained many clients through MySpace.com, which he says is widely used.

"Some of my music clients list me as their legal counsel on their MySpace sites, thereby becoming a conduit for other artists who visit their sites and need counsel in the United States," Legros said. "Typically, once they arrive in the United States with their visas, they will also need an attorney to review contracts and other agreements, so the client relationship extends beyond the immigration process."

One of Legros' new clients is a celebrity choreographer for a noted pop singer who contacted him after visiting a current client's MySpace page. Legros now handles visas for the majority of the choreographer's staff, including road managers and dancers.

### **LEVERAGE LANGUAGES**

Speaking multiple languages can greatly facilitate networking for new global clients, as it reduces the "disconnect" that often occurs as cultures collide. Olivera Medenica of Wahab & Medenica LLC speaks English, French, and Serbo-Croatian. Her French language proficiency has been especially useful in developing international clients.

"Although it's not absolutely necessary in all cases to speak the client's language, it is a huge asset in terms of breaking cultural barriers," Medenica said. "Even after they retain you, they will most likely feel comfortable speaking their own language," adding that nearly all of her conference calls with French-speaking clients are in French, not English.

Medenica also notes that understanding the cultural differences is essential to networking.



If your firm has been considering making a foray into **foreign markets**, now is the time to act. Examine your global contact base and see what **ASSETS** you already have. Then figure out which **markets** you want to go after, and network your way in.

"If you're working with French people, you have to understand how French people network," she said. "They consider it vulgar for an attorney to hand out a business card and openly solicit work when meeting for the first time. They like to create a relationship first and then talk business once a rapport is established."

To avoid making an embarrassing *faux pas* in your international networking efforts, do some homework about the ways that clients like to be approached in your target markets. Talk to current clients or even personal acquaintances who have done business with individuals in these countries to determine how to put your firm's best foot forward. International business brokers, independent consultants, and trade associations can also be helpful to facilitate positive interactions.

Cross-cultural and language challenges can slow down the networking process, but this often can be addressed by retaining a skilled interpreter. Kathy Robb, a Partner at Hunton & Williams, recalls an instance where she went to a dinner with a group of female Chinese professionals and entrepreneurs who were delegates to a United Nations meeting on sustainability. (Hunton has a Beijing office.)

"While every single thing that was said had to go through the interpreter, causing a delay in communication, I was amazed at how well we understood each other," Robb said. "Even humorous remarks were appreciated on both sides. The interpreter, an American who is fluent in Chinese, played a critical role, however, reminding us that entrepreneurialism and capitalism in China are encouraged in a governmental framework very different from ours, and certain terms may carry different assumptions for each of us. So we needed to be sensitive to the nuances in asking questions and developing connections with these female executives."

Attorneys who are immigrants to the United States can use that to their advantage. Francisco Gonzalez, a Partner at Adorno & Yoss, was born in Venezuela and speaks English, Spanish, French, and Italian. Having been educated in Venezuela and the United States, Gonzalez is using his diverse background and experience to lead the development of Adorno's South American client base.

"Because of our attorneys' own heritage, we understand firsthand what makes Latin Americans 'tick' – their values, their way of doing business – and we can effectively help our clients understand and deal with the intricacies of doing business in the region," he said.

#### HELPFUL GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Even if you only slightly scratch the surface, you will find an amazing array of networking associations and networking groups that bring people in touch with other legal professionals and provide forums or events for client development. U.S. organizations such as the International Bar Association ([www.ibanet.org](http://www.ibanet.org)), International Lawyer Network ([www.internationallawyernetwork.com](http://www.internationallawyernetwork.com)), Lawyers Associated Worldwide ([www.lawyersworldwide.com](http://www.lawyersworldwide.com)), and the International Lawyers Network ([www.iln.com](http://www.iln.com)) are good places to start. Memberships in elite organizations like Lex Mundi ([www.lexmundi.com](http://www.lexmundi.com)) can also be excellent branding tools, as these associations have strict selection criteria, regular reviews of member firms, and a stated dedication to including only the finest law firms worldwide.

More specific, vertically focused groups specialize in particular geographic regions or practice areas. In major U.S. cities, for instance, there are often several chambers of commerce. Your firm's prospecting objectives will determine how narrow or broad a focus it will take in attending events or signing up for memberships.

Listing attorneys in certain membership directories for these groups can be a good source of new business leads, but the firm can revisit these decisions regularly to determine whether the listing “pulls” – meaning that it actually brings in new clients and contacts to the practice.

Under Gonzalez’s leadership, Adorno has developed an international law practice through building formal associations and mutually beneficial relationships. Gonzalez is Managing Director of the Law Firm of the Americas (LFA, [www.lfalaw.org](http://www.lfalaw.org)), an association of independent law firms servicing clients in the Western Hemisphere (the Americas and Europe). The LFA is an effective referral network for law firms committed to international work. Gonzalez says that Adorno landed a major Chilean manufacturing client through its LFA relationship, and that his firm returned the favor by bringing in the Chilean firm as outside counsel for one of its clients.

“This is much more than a theoretical exercise,” Gonzalez said. “It is not only an effective revenue generation strategy, but it also separates each member from its traditional competitors because it adds a completely new facet to the practice: the ability to serve clients beyond geographic borders, just like the big firms can.”

Another beneficial association for Adorno is the State Capital Global Law Firm Group (SCGLFG, [www.statecapitallaw.org](http://www.statecapitallaw.org)), which comprises independent law firms in business markets and financial centers worldwide. As a result of its membership in SCGLFG, Adorno was able to persuade at least two of its FORTUNE 500 clients to allow the firm to become its Latin American counsel.

### **SMALL WORLD, BIG BUSINESS**

As communications technologies seem to shrink the world, international networking opportunities for attorneys are flourishing. If your firm has been considering making a foray into foreign markets, now is the time to act. Examine your global contact base and see what assets you already have. Then figure out which markets you want to go after, and network your way in.

However you choose to network, the business is out there as long as you have the contacts and the skills to propel yourself. Above all else, the

ability to develop relationships, gain trust, and provide superior legal services will serve the firm and its attorneys well no matter what the goals are – whether it’s in your neighborhood or on the other side of the Earth. ✱

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## **LEARNMORE**

### **ALA Resources**

These titles are available through the ALA Bookstore, [www.alanet.org/bookstore](http://www.alanet.org/bookstore).

- *Marketing the Legal Mind: Turning New Perspectives into Powerful Opportunities*, by Henry Dahut
- *Through the Client’s Eyes: New Approaches to Get Clients to Hire You Again and Again*, by Henry Ewalt

The following are accessible via ALA’s Legal Management Resource Center. Visit <http://thesource.alanet.org> and type keyword “international” in the search engine

- “The Web@Work Around the Globe: Help Your Site Attract International Clients”

The following articles are available in the ALA Management Encyclopedia<sup>SM</sup> (ALAME) [www.alaencyclopedia.org](http://www.alaencyclopedia.org):

- “The Administrator’s Role in Client Relationship Management”
- “The Art and Strategy of Business Development”

The following article is available in the Publications section of ALA’s Web site at [www.alanet.org/publications/pubindex.html](http://www.alanet.org/publications/pubindex.html):

- “Service with a Smile ... and Much More” by Cheri Terzian, March/April 2006 issue of *Legal Management*