



Marketing

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THE PLACE TO NETWORK

Blow That Curve!

Bring in Business As an Associate By Networking

By Christy Burke

Remember those kids in high school who blew the bell curve — the overachievers? Those were the ones who asked for extra credit projects even when the rest of us were up to our eyebrows in the standard work requirements. Well, they still exist in the professional world, and they know how to succeed far beyond what's expected or required of them. And not surprisingly, some of them grew up to be high-powered associates at law firms!

Typically, associates are not required to develop their own books of business as part of their job descriptions. In fact, usually they are kept so busy billing hours that business development may seem like a virtual impossibility for them. Marketing is also an intimidating area for many. Law schools generally don't teach self-promotion, so how are associates supposed to know how to do it?

Despite these challenges, however, there are law firm associates out there who have developed major clients for their employers. They do it for myriad reasons — because they enjoy it, receive monetary incentives, or feel it positions them better for when they are evaluated for possible partnership. Some associates are natural-born rainmakers, but others have to work at it. The rewards can be great for these go-getters. Since their ranks are few, they really stand to distinguish themselves from their peers in a tangible, bottom-line way.

Paramjit L. Mahli of The Sun Communication Group (and a contributing author to *MLF*) coaches attorneys about networking and business development. She says that associates frequently come to her for help after a few years at their firm, which is when they start wondering about whether they're in line for partnership or not. Mahli says that associates can't assume that business will be handed to them on a silver platter, and advises that they need to make their own connections, thus increasing their professional value to the firm. "Clients like to do business with people they know, like and trust," she says. "Business building is all about the relationships, so I teach associates to put their best foot forward with everybody, including their paralegals — to make that connection with other humans."

Through a combination of cleverness, self-confidence, courage and tapping assistance from your supervising partners, you can develop business as an associate, well before you enter the mythical realm of partnership. As an associate, you'll naturally lack the sheer number of years of experience that a partner has. But so what? You still have a personal network, and you have opportunities and talents with which to forge and strengthen your own connections.

TAPPING YOUR PERSONAL NETWORK

Jeremy Cohen, a senior associate at Kramer Levin's New York office, has made the most of his personal network and contacts to bring business into his firm. He has brought in two new real estate litigation clients plus additional business from current clients. Cohen recommends a soft-sell approach, while also not being shy about asking for the business.

Cohen admits that "it's inherently awkward when you're meeting new people cold, and when it's purely a business relationship." He recommends a casual, low-pressure approach after meeting a contact for the first time. After a few days, follow up by phone or e-mail and set up a lunch.

"Nothing bad ever comes from having lunch with somebody — a social lunch can turn into a real opportunity," says Cohen, who will sometimes invite a partner along to a business meal or presentation to extend his individual clout. "As an associate, you have to market yourself differently than if you were a partner, but you can still develop business."

Cohen mines his personal network of fellow alumni from law school and college, and also has found participation in sports teams to be fertile ground for making contacts. Two of his law school friends have become general counsel for corporations, meaning that they are both strong prospects for his business development purposes. He also says that corporate and professional baseball and basketball leagues have been a great source of professional networking.

Another associate who has used personal contacts to develop new clients is Andrea Kamage, a seventh-year associate at Lerner David, an IP boutique firm in Westfield, NJ. During her three-year tenure at the firm, Kamage has been instrumental in building their biotech practice.

Kamage says that business development for women can have its challenges, since the reality remains that many major decisions are made by men in her area of specialization. However, she notes that being a working mother has been a great source of networking. She belongs to several "Moms' groups" in her area, which happens to be populated with many dual career households. Kamage frequently meets other professional working mothers that are in a position to refer business to her.

ASK PARTNERS FOR HELP AND GUIDANCE

Without the title "partner" after their names, associates often find it harder to be taken seriously, especially by big-name clients. In many circles, associates are immediately thought of as junior personnel. The client often wants to talk directly to the partner, assuming that the person with the more senior title is the better lawyer. Rather than fighting against this inevitable perception, savvy associates will decide to bring in partners to assist them in landing a piece of business or in making a good impression. This may entail a bit of pride-swallowing, but isn't it worth it if your firm gets the business?

In addition, many firms have initiated mentorship programs to help associates develop their legal acumen, but also to help them market themselves. One such firm is Axinn Veltrop & Harkrider (AV&H) in New York. Nick Gaglio is a seventh-year

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associate at the firm and he has taken advantage of these resources to learn about business development.

Gaglio notes that his firm gives each associate a marketing budget specifically to entertain clients, prospects and other key contacts. "By making associates responsible for our own marketing budgets, even from an early point in our careers, AV&H puts the building blocks in place for future business development expectations."

He adds that as associates become more senior at his firm, they are highly encouraged to become involved in bar association committees, and to take on a leadership role. While working on these committees, associate attorneys can showcase their substantive value and skills by participating in publications, events and other projects.

MAKE YOUR OWN FOOTSTEPS

Associates often feel pressure to follow closely in the footsteps of their supervising partners, in an effort to avoid making errors and to "fit in" well at the firm. However, there's no reason why you can't break your own new ground as well.

Kamage has found success in writing articles about her field of legal expertise, which has led to great exposure and a higher profile for her as an attorney. Her firm's partners traditionally were not avid article writers, but because she enjoyed writing, she decided to explore this new territory on her own. "Don't be afraid to do things that your partners aren't doing, and don't be afraid *not* to follow in someone else's footsteps. You can make your own footsteps," says Kamage.

Niche markets can also be a good place for associates to use their unique talents and proficiencies. Mahli notes that if an attorney is fluent in a specific language, this can open up great possibilities for him or her beyond what their firm may have touched before. She recalls that one of her clients was fluent in Russian and became a well-regarded legal resource for Russian family and divorce law because of that skill.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL BENEFITS OF DEVELOPING BUSINESS

In addition to building their personal and professional networks from an external standpoint, associates clearly need to pay attention to internal networking at their own firms. By impressing partners, as well colleagues and support staff who can be influential recommenders, they increase their odds of being invited to join the firm's partnership ranks one day. In developing a book of business as an associate, you can increase your profile at the firm and get yourself noticed, while putting some extra money in the bank as well.

Bill Mentlik is Managing Partner at Lerner David, the firm at which Andrea Kamage works as an associate. Mentlik recalls, "For a long time, our firm operated under the assumption that the senior partners would be our most productive rainmakers, but the world has changed. We encourage our associates to bring in business and develop their own relationships, as Andrea has done. We believe this kind of activity is at the forefront of what makes a successful associate." Mentlik adds that, in addition to competence as attorneys, associates' ability to develop business certainly puts them in a favorable light when the time comes to evaluate them for partnership.

Clearly, there are many advantages to getting a head start with business development while you're still an associate — and you don't have to be an overachiever to do it. Be aware of opportunities all around you to build relationships, maintain and expand your personal network when possible, and find your own unique rainmaking style. From shooting hoops to parenting, writing articles to chairing bar committees, there are infinite opportunities to widen your circle. As Mentlik says, the world has indeed changed, which means that you — as an associate — can blow the curve at any time!

