

IMPORTANT POINTS ON CLIENT DEVELOPMENT

It takes a lot more than being the best lawyer in town to become a rainmaker. Client development demands focusing on your client's needs instead of your own and branding yourself as a lawyer who is distinguished from – not merely better than – the competition.

Let's begin with some very important main points. First, client development is not about "marketing or selling." It is all about serving and caring for your clients. When you operate in sales-mode, you think about what you need/want (origination credit/1950 billable hours.) When you serve and care for your clients, you focus on them. As a result, you are a better listener and you search for a way to accomplish their objective, not yours. You understand the business context of the work you will be doing for the client.

Second, being a highly skilled lawyer is merely the price you pay to get in the game. I hear many lawyers say that the best client development technique is to build a reputation for doing high quality work. I totally agree, but your competitors are also highly skilled, and they are building the same reputation as you for doing high quality work. Client development demands that you understand your client's industry and business. In addition, it demands that you understand the needs of your client representative.

Third, client development is very little about what you prefer to do or what you do best. It is all about what your client's needs. When I began as a construction industry litigator, I was focused on litigation. I learned over time that most contractors never want to try a case. They want to resolve disputes as early as possible. That revelation changed my focus.

Fourth, client development demands that you are more responsive and more efficient than your competitors. Suppose you were the best in your law firm at some aspect of law that clients needed. Then, just suppose you became known as the best in your city and maybe later the best in the state. If your expertise is in an area that continues to be needed and one that you truly enjoy, you will likely get opportunities to serve clients and then you can build a long lasting client relationship. Once you have built that reputation, then seek again for ways to differentiate yourself or your firm from your competitors.

A few years ago there was a front page article in the Wall Street Journal about how Kohl's department store was beating the socks off of J.C. Penney's right in J.C. Penney's Dallas backyard. The writer noted that the two retailers sold the same products to the same market. Then, why was the newcomer, Kohl's doing so much better? The writer concluded it was because it was easy for the purchaser to park at Kohl's, find what she was looking for and be finished in a short time. At Penney's, the shopper had to park in a big mall parking lot and, frequently, advertised sale items were nowhere to be found. It was a struggle to shop at Penney's. So, what can we lawyers learn from Kohl's? We need to focus on delivering our services in ways that best meet our client needs.

Finally, client development is about identifying and providing solutions to problems before the client realizes there is a problem. When I joined my present law firm, I had all my files and books on moveable book cases in the hallway. I marched off to two days of orientation. When I returned late Friday afternoon, I met a young man named Mason. He worked for our

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facilities management group. He said to me: “Mr. Parvin, I know you need everything organized so you can hit the ground running on Monday. If you would like, I would be happy to come in on Saturday and help you get organized.” I was blown away. Mason clearly understood the problem and offered a solution before I mentioned the problem. I learned the same lesson later that year. I had invited executives from my largest client and their spouses to Dallas to a Cowboys football game. On the Monday preceding the game, I got a call from Jan in our marketing department. She said: “Cordell, how would you like for me to drive with you to Texas Stadium, show you which exit to get off the freeway, show you our assigned parking place, where to enter the stadium, which elevator to get on, where to get off the elevator and how to find the firm’s suite?” Jan did not say it but she could have added: “I am willing to do this so you do not make a complete fool of yourself in front of your most important client.” Once again, I learned the importance of identifying a problem and offering a solution. Just suppose Jan would have been able to show me all she did from my computer through a video or computer generated animation. That would have saved at least an hour and would have been even more valuable.

As a summary, if you want to start building a reputation and building relationships with clients focus on five important points. First, client development is all about serving and caring for your clients. Second, you will not develop client relationships merely by being a highly skilled lawyer and doing quality work. It is a necessity but only a starting point. Being a highly skilled lawyer is merely the price you pay to get in the game. Third, client development is very much about what your clients need. Find ways to learn what they need and put the work you do in that context. Fourth, strive to differentiate yourself from your competitors. Become the best at something as a starting point and then be different in your relationship building. Finally, identify and provide solutions to problems before the client realizes there is a problem. That will do more to build a lasting relationship than almost anything you can do.