

Developing Peak Selling Practice Groups and Rainmaker Junior Partners: A Game Plan for the Business Development Professional

By Cordell Parvin

"Cordell, you are not a real lawyer. You are nothing but a salesman." With those words, a former partner thought he had paid me the ultimate insult. Instead, he helped me understand what you, as business development professionals, deal with every single day. Business development for lawyers is frankly not very complicated. I think your biggest challenge is finding creative ways to get lawyers away from their desks to actually do it. As a lawyer who has spent a career "selling," I believe you can make a significant impact with practice groups and junior partners by starting with the basics. In this article I want to share with you how you might help them get started.

Why do I recommend you work with practice groups and junior partners? Practice groups have a more narrow focus making it easier to market their services. Junior partners are bright, energetic, and for the most part unfocused in their client development. Understanding these characteristics will provide opportunities for you to help practice groups and junior partners succeed in a meaningful way.

Help Practice Groups Become Peak Sellers

When lawyers are selling to everyone, they are selling to no one. That means for business development, practice groups should be organized based on what their clients do, not what their lawyers do. When I was focused on commercial litigation, I was challenged to figure out my target potential clients, much less understand what they needed. Once I made the change from litigation to construction law, and then later to transportation construction law, my business development became much more focused and more successful. Begin working with industry focused practice groups. Next, find a practice group leader who understands business development, is open to your ideas, and is anxious for his or her practice group to become more successful. You will not be able to motivate the unmotivated, but if they see another practice group becoming more successful, they will more likely be willing to change.

What are the most important things you can do to help? As a practice-group leader the greatest help I received from our business development professionals was their assistance in creating both a strategic plan and a marketing plan. They began by asking our practice group to identify what we called "targeted differentiators." In sales terms we were asked to figure out our unique selling proposition. I like the phrase "targeted differentiators" better because as lawyers it is important for us to be focused on our clients' needs when we think about how we can differentiate ourselves. So, you might ask the lawyers in the practice group: "Why do clients hire you over competitors? What do you offer that your competitors do not?" The most important part of this exercise is to get the lawyers in the

practice group to think about what their clients and potential clients value, and how they are able to provide it.

Marketing plans for practice groups should focus on building the group's profile, expanding relationships with the group's existing clients, and developing new practice area business from existing firm clients. Helping practice groups develop a marketing plan is far easier for industry-based practice groups. A good starting point is to break down the segments of the industry. Each of the segments will likely have associations and industry publications, which present opportunities to build the practice group's profile.

In my experience, law firms, practice groups, and lawyers enthusiastically create plans and start many client development efforts, but quickly revert to their old habits. To avoid this common occurrence, help your practice groups develop action plans once the targeted differentiators are determined. Each of the differentiators and action items can become agenda items for practice group meetings. First, have the practice group set a business development goal based on increasing revenue. Then, have members of the group brainstorm 25 action items to achieve that goal. Every time I have sat through one of these brainstorming exercises, I have been amazed by the quality of the ideas. As a means of following up, I suggest that you participate in the practice group meetings. In a way, your participation will serve as a reminder that the group had committed to actions in its plan.

Help Junior Partners Become Peak Sellers

Would you be surprised by how few of your junior partners have written goals and a business plan? I know I was surprised. It was like they expected to "inherit" the clients when the senior lawyers retired.

As you know, business development is a contact sport and junior partners will be successful if, and only if, they make business development part of their habits. I have found that those lawyers who do not have a burning desire will frequently say: "I haven't been able to do any business development activities because I have been too busy with billable work."

Where can you start, to help your junior partners make business development part of their habits? I suggest asking these questions:

1. Do you set goals for client development each year and have a plan to achieve them?
2. Do you plan time each week for client development activities?
3. Are you focused about your contacts with clients, potential clients, or people who can refer business to you?

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4. Do you regularly visit/meet with clients just to find out what is going on in their business?
5. When you see an article, book, or seminar that may be of interest to clients, do you forward/send it to them?
6. When you finish a project do you follow up and seek feedback on your performance?
7. Do you ask questions and listen well when visiting with clients?
8. Do you read your clients' trade publications?
9. Do you know your clients' industry, business, strategy, and legal needs?
10. Do you know your client representatives personally, including names of their family members, their assistant's name, their interests outside of work, and their values?

Next, help them prepare a business plan and goals. I am fond of the quote: "Most people aim at nothing and hit it with amazing accuracy." Developing a business plan with goals is the first step toward aiming at something. I recommend you have them prepare a plan from the top down and the bottom up. Have them start with setting goals and working down to activities. Then, looking from the bottom up, ask how much time they will spend on business development, and allocate that time to the activities in the first part of the plan.

For many lawyers developing meaningful goals is an intimidating process. Explain these two types of goals. The first are "end result" goals. For example, one junior partner may want to double her book of business. That is an end result goal over which she will not have complete control. But, setting a goal like that is a motivator and will enable her to keep score on how she is doing. The more important goals are action item goals. She will have control over those goals and she can check them off when she does them. Have your junior partners break action item goals down into smaller pieces, which make it more likely they will actually take the actions.

Here are suggestions you can give junior partners on how to develop meaningful goals: Brainstorm goals by writing down the first thing that comes to your mind; Review and prioritize the draft goals; Starting with the most important goal, ask why achieving it is important to you. Tell them that if they do not have a good answer to the "why" question, it is unlikely they will have the discipline or commitment to stick with it; Identify who can help; Develop action items; Decide on the very first action, which should be done as soon as possible.

Building profile is extremely important. As Seth Godin says: "Being the best in the world is seriously underestimated." For lawyers, the world is their clients and potential clients. One way lawyers can build their profile is by writing and speaking. Another way is by being

active and highly visible in the community or the Bar. Your junior partners will only be successful in writing and speaking if their article or presentation addresses their target clients' problems, opportunities, external or internal changes, and offers a solution. The target clients will simply not pay attention unless the writing or speaking addresses a need. To be even more effective, your junior partners should strive to identify a problem, opportunity, external or internal change, and offer a solution before their target clients are even aware of the problem, opportunity, or change.

There is a great deal you can do to help junior partners with relationship building. Start with helping them become more purposeful and focused on their contacts. Simply figuring out which contacts are their most important ones, and focusing more attention on those is valuable for them to do.

I hate to confirm what you already know and that is many lawyers lack charisma and people skills. Unfortunately, most lawyers do not know they lack these skills. I believe many clients hire lawyers rather than law firms and they hire lawyers with whom they connect. I also believe that clients decide very quickly whether they trust and have rapport with a lawyer they are considering. So, lawyers get one chance to make a good first impression and build trust. I have found that most junior partners do not appreciate that their dress and body language are so important. Most junior partners also do not understand the importance of asking open-ended questions and listening.

While some may argue that charisma cannot be learned, I disagree. What can you, the business development professional, do to help? I suggest you consider mock client meetings in which you videotape the junior partner. Let him see how the client sees him. Let her listen to the conversation she is having with the client to appreciate the client's perspective. How is her eye contact? Does he appear to be confident? Is she asking open-ended questions, or talking too much about herself or the firm?

Conclusion

As a lawyer, I know business development professionals face many challenges working with lawyers who do not want to change. Famous basketball coach, Bobby Knight once said: "Most people have the will to win, few have the will to prepare to win." I believe the greatest contribution you can make for practice groups and for junior partners is helping them focus on "the will to prepare to win." It is all about the basics. 💧

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