

Practical Success

Cordell Parvin

Becoming Remarkable

I really appreciate what I have learned from reading books, articles, and blog posts by Seth Godin. He is truly *the* marketing guru. I have been able to take his ideas and figure out what they mean for lawyers. A couple of years ago, I both read and watched a video in which he talked about the importance of being remarkable. It resonated with me.

I have learned from my coaching of senior associates and junior partners that many young lawyers don't know where to start with their client development efforts. They mistakenly think they need to sell clients, make cold calls, and figure out other ways to solicit business. Since all of this is distasteful to most, they don't ever get started.

In a nutshell, here is what I am trying to teach young lawyers: You cannot directly market or try to "sell" clients. The harder you try to sell the less successful you will be. Clients want to buy (or need to buy), but they do not want to be sold. Whatever you tell clients about how good you are or how your service is extraordinary, they will likely not believe it because your competitors are telling them the same things.



Clients do not want to hire lawyers who are ordinary. They want to hire lawyers who are extraordinary, remarkable, and memorable. The game plan for successful client development is having the clients come to the lawyer as a result of creating something remarkable, or being remarkable and having clients, potential clients, and people who can refer business talk about the lawyer. Seth Godin says that the premise of "remarkable" is to have non-compensated third parties become evangelists for you and your services.

In a world where law firms and lawyers all look alike, how can a lawyer stand out from the crowd and be remarkable, extraordinary, and memorable? I teach lawyers how I did it and how they can do it. The first step in becoming remarkable is to determine what you want in your career. Second, you need to decide who is in your target market, meaning you need to learn how to become credible by building your profile. Third, you need to decide *who* you want to hire you. Next, figure out what you need to learn to determine your clients' potential legal issues before other lawyers do and even before the client be-

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comes aware of them. Then, write about the issue, from the clients' point of view, and hope it leads to speaking opportunities. This effort makes you visible to your target market, so you can create something that will be noticed—and if you have found an important issue, it will make you remarkable in the eyes of those potential clients.

Recently, a young lawyer I coached asked me to give him an actual example of what I was suggesting. So let me give you one from my own personal experience.

In January 1983, President Reagan signed into law the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1982, which doubled the federal funding for highway construction. The Act included a provision requiring that not less than 10 percent of the funds must be allocated to Disadvantaged (minority) Business Enterprises. Overnight, that quadrupled the number of Disadvantaged Business Enterprises participating in federal highway construction—and who were in need of specialized legal services. It created a huge problem because there weren't enough qualified and adequately capitalized firms to do the new volume of work. I knew this would be a big issue, so I studied everything I could on the matter, put together a notebook, and ultimately wrote a guide for contractors.

Because of my guide, I was then asked to speak at contractors' meetings across the country. I spoke to contractors' associations at national and state meetings. I was on a panel with a lawyer from the Federal Highway Administration who recognized that I knew this program backwards and forwards.

About a year later, the editor of *Roads & Bridges* magazine, the top highway construction-industry publication, asked to interview me. I suggested that instead of just one interview, I could write something for the magazine—a monthly column.

My column appeared in the magazine from 1983 through 2007. It was the single most important opportunity for me to get in front of my target market: highway contractors.

One day I received a call from the general counsel of one of the largest highway contractors in the United States. I learned that the contractor had a problem in Atlanta and found out about me from the guide I had written. The general counsel said he had been told that I was the lawyer to hire because I knew more about the law on minority contracting legal issues than any other lawyer. They hired me, and for the next 20-plus years they were my largest client. That is what client development is all about.

Incidentally, the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise program remains a hugely important part of federal highway construction law practice. In the last year I practiced law, I was hired by the Associated General Contractors to write a "Tool Kit" to help their members comply with the program.

Each young lawyer I have met can be remarkable. What does it take? Put simply, you have to be willing to figure out how things that are going on in the world will affect your clients, then you have to be willing to try new things, make a commitment to work at it, and remain patient and persistent.

Several lawyers I coach are writing blogs. One lawyer I am coaching has a weekly podcast and a weekly Internet radio show. Through the blogs and podcast/radio shows, these lawyers have the opportunity to be remarkable in the eyes of their clients.

What ideas do you have that can make you remarkable in the eyes of your clients? The author invites readers to share their experiences in professional development and to suggest ideas for future columns. Please contact him at coaching@cordellparvin.com.