

## **Developing Your Practice**

*By Kendyl Taylor Hanks*

Developing a successful practice requires long-term planning and a candid look at where you are now and where you want to be down the road. Here are the basic, but critical, aspects of successful practice development.

**1. Avocation as vocation.** Be candid with yourself about your personality and your skills. Are you outgoing or an introvert? Are you a strong writer, a whiz with numbers, or a successful negotiator? Assess how your personality and skills fit within your field, and be honest about whether it's a good match. Playing to your strengths and your personality will make you shine.

As a general rule if you love what you do, you will be good at it. Clients and partners can tell the difference between a happy lawyer who is enthusiastic about her work and a miserable one (which one would you prefer to work with?). Be honest about your desires and priorities, and whether your firm is the right place to fulfill them.

**2. Mentors.** Sometimes the best mentors are found outside the firm, or they don't practice law at all. Choose wisely. Not all good lawyers are good mentors, and not all good mentors are superstar lawyers. Ultimately you should go with your instinct. Your mentor must be someone who can help you achieve your goals and who will give candid advice and constructive criticism. Ideally, your mentor will be a source of business for you.

Take the initiative, and don't be afraid to approach someone about being a mentor. Most will be flattered by your interest. But don't expect wisdom automatically to flow your way—to get the most out of the relationship, you must be an active “mentee.”

**3. Reputation.** Identify opportunities to build a reputation in the relevant market. Bar organizations, professional and trade groups, pro bono organizations, and social networks that have relevance to your chosen practice area are great starts. Choose groups in which you would enjoy being involved to increase the chances that you will be.

Be prepared to spend time (nonbillable, alas) building your reputation. Take pro bono cases in your field, volunteer to write articles, speak on topics of interest, and serve as a leader of bar organizations and substantive committees. Become an expert in something. Pitch it as a CLE program. Make your articles available on your Web site. You will develop a reputation as someone with a special expertise, and the calls will follow. And remember a good reputation is hard to build but easy to lose—guard it jealously.

**4. Clients.** Keeping your existing clients happy is a significant component of practice development. Provide the best and most cost-effective client service possible. Be proactive, responsive, and prompt. Learn about your clients, their businesses, and the legal services they require. Follow the latest developments in their industries (try Google alerts for this purpose). Send updates to clients when you hear about a legal development or lawsuit that might interest them, whether or not you are currently working on their files.

Developing new clients is not just for partners! Clients want smart, enthusiastic lawyers to do their work. Keep track of colleagues who go in-house or move to other firms. Everyone has conflicts and refers out clients. And everyone likes to send those clients to good lawyers who also happen to be friends. Do your best to steer referrals to your contacts, and they will do the same for you.

**5. Economics.** Understand where your practice fits into the firm's economics and how your career trajectory corresponds with the firm's business plan. Your practice must be valuable (however that's measured). The more compatible the value of your practice is with the culture, structure and future of your firm, the faster your practice will grow and the more rewarding it will be.

Know your market and be flexible. Your market may include a few clients or many. It may include government agencies, large businesses or individuals. It will vary depending on your geographic location, the size of your law firm and the local and national economies. It may change from year to year. Pay attention to it, understand it and respond to it. If your practice is not flexible because it is highly specialized or dependent on one partner or one client, think about your backup plan should either disappear.

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