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How to Grow a Partner

Deborah Brightman Farone*

Farone Advisors LLC

At many law firms, there's a particular time of year when a small group of associates is elevated to partnership, while at other firms, an associate or counsel may be brought in and instantly anointed partner. Whichever route one takes to grab the gold ring of partnership, it's an exciting time: a celebration often accompanied by the sound of popping champagne corks and the shredding of mortgages for tiny studio apartments.

There is a set of predictable questions asked by most new partners; after all, they are now part owner of a professional service organization. Concerns may range from the details of a new compensation structure, professional liability, and office space to a myriad of other issues. As the CMO of two successful law firms, I have coached and managed more than twenty seasons of freshly minted, talented partners. When I sit down with them for the first time after they've been made

* Ms Farone is the former CMO of Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP and Debevoise & Plimpton LLP.

partner, these new stakeholders are both excited and a bit nervous about their new role. And by the end of the meeting, even if the firm is not sending the message to the new partner that they need to be making rain, each one of them has asked the same question: "What should I do to develop my own practice?"

Start with Your Existing Clients

In the legal profession, there is often a belief held by new partners that they need to sprint from the starting block and begin chasing business. But that is not the case. As a new partner, the most important thing for you to do is to take account of and assess your existing clients.

The reason for this is two-fold. First, if a client already uses and likes your firm, that client has an incentive to continue to work with the organization, particularly if the service or attention your client has been receiving has been meeting or exceeding its expectations. The client has already concluded that this is a firm that is able to fulfill a legal need. Therefore, there is an implied opportunity to further solidify and grow the relationship between partner and client. This may provide an opportunity for you to explore other practice areas in which your firm might be able to help the client, or it could mean finding new ways for process improvement to use new technologies to help streamline workflow.

The second reason to concentrate on existing clients is the potential for obtaining referral business. Like Cinderella at the ball, this can only occur when there is a genuine transformation. Turning a happy client into a delighted client is the

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only way to grow an apostle for the firm—someone who is extraordinarily pleased and proud of the relationship with the firm and who is likely to share that experience with business colleagues. This does not happen automatically, nor does it happen with clients that are simply pleased with your firm's work; a client must be *delighted* with the firm's service in order to make a referral. It's a high threshold to meet and requires authentic and consistent attention over time.

At the law firms with which I have worked, we've demonstrated that referrals can be a powerful and consistent way to garner clients. A referral from an existing client has more weight and validity because it comes via a client, rather than through a cold call or another less direct form of marketing. Doing a fabulous job for an existing client is economically the most important marketing step one can take. A study done by the University of Pennsylvania and the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, showed that "The lifetime value of referred customers, measured over a six-year horizon was 16% higher, on average, than that of non-referred customers with similar demographics and time of acquisition."[1]

Delight a Client

But how do you delight a client? Producing great work and providing good service are the baseline of any good legal relationship, and without them, nothing will grow the business; but in trying to create an apostle relationship, it is necessary to dig in deep and get to know your clients, their concerns, and their industry. Start with the basics. It's easy to use the Internet to surmise which trade

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publications might be of interest to your clients and denote which industry associations, conferences, and trends play a role in their work lives. And if that does not work, ask them. Most clients will be happy that their lawyer has taken an interest.

William B. Matteson, a former presiding partner at Debevoise & Plimpton and the first person to hire me at a law firm, was a consummate client guy. His clients, the titans of industry, adored and relied on him. He was known for saying, "Make your clients your friends and your friends your clients." The essence behind this advice makes a great deal of sense, particularly in today's competitive business climate.

Think about providing commercial advice. Clients are interested in having their lawyers solve their legal problems, but most are also interested in receiving practical business support that helps them in their jobs. Find out what keeps them up at night beyond the defined legal problem for which you've been hired. Everyone has a boss, customers, shareholders, or a board of directors. Consider the demands that are being placed on your clients. Try to get to know what their pressure points are in order to be helpful.

Taking an interest in a client may mean becoming a better listener, but it may also translate into visiting clients where they work, offering to tour their factory (if they have one), and suggesting that on a gratis basis, you will spend time getting to know their processes or helping to train their junior lawyers.

Develop Your Practice

It's important to be able to articulate the parameters of your practice. While some of those details are often still being worked out when partnership decisions are made, you as a new partner will want to begin working with firm management to define this positioning. This becomes important early on as you start to formulate a public presence throughout the profession and by the messages you convey on the firm's website, social media, and the new business biographies you use when pitching new business. Though plans might change midstream, either because of a client's needs or other economic factors, taking a direction and having a goal are an important first step. In the future, if there is a transition in the marketplace or a choice must be made to focus on more than one practice, that's fine too. Practices are meant to be adaptable, but what is key to any positioning is that you can easily articulate and feel comfortable working in your chosen arena.

Become an Expert

Malcolm Gladwell, who has written on the significance of what constitutes becoming an expert in an area, notably said, "Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good."[2]

Experts, whether they are the greatest commercial litigators or world-famous orthopedic surgeons, need to continue to hone their skills. In addition to practicing their craft over and over again, continuous learning by attending conferences and meeting with industry leaders will help. For example, professional groups such as the ABA, or more focused ones for particular practices, such as SIFMA for securities lawyers or Ethisphere for compliance lawyers, can assist both with continuing education and in making new contacts. Serve on a committee or aim to be elected to a board, but in either case, get "into the weeds" of the organization.

Establish a Brand

While law firms have become more sophisticated in terms of their positioning and branding, individual branding is equally as important to growing a practice. As a new partner, you should be certain that your values align with those of the firm, but it is also essential that you think about how you as an individual want to be known. Ask: are you the affable trusts and estates lawyer who knows everything about family-owned businesses, or are you the well-rounded securities litigator whose clients cover a variety of industries? Realize that every interaction is part of a lawyer's brand, from the way that lawyer treats an administrative staff member to the way a document is prepared or a case is litigated. All of these seemingly unrelated actions have a cumulative impact on creating both an institutional and personal brand.

According to Norm Rubenstein, a partner at Zeughauser Group and an authority on legal branding,

> It's also important at this stage to start engaging in all forms of credentialing, which means investing time and energy in contributing to thought leadership. Involvement in professional associations and in legal and business networking groups creates opportunities for writing articles, giving talks, and playing a leadership role in the kinds of organizations where you are likeliest to meet individuals who may at some point have the authority to engage you.

While Rubenstein believes that young partners should devote their time only to organizations that accurately mirror their own personal interests and values, he sees no conflict if one's community and civic activities coincide with the priorities of the partner's clients or prospects. He states, "Why not find out what your clients are doing? Look at their pro bono activities and volunteer to work alongside them. Let them see you demonstrate your passion, dedication, and judgment. Along the way," Rubenstein adds, "it's going to burnish your reputation and help create stronger relationships."

Organize Your Contacts

Careers are often influenced by serendipity. There may be numerous personal and professional events impacting you throughout your trajectory; however, the two pillars of expertise and solid contacts provide a consistent foundation. Treasure your connections and consolidate them into one system. As a new partner, you may not think that you have established contacts, but you are incorrect. The folks with whom you went to law school or the people you may have stayed in touch with from childhood, high school, or college are all connections. Those you met across the other side of a deal or at a client's business may move higher up on the corporate ladder or become a referral source of business.

There are also the intermediaries, accountants, consultants, and expert witnesses you have gotten to know as you've worked on matters. And as an associate,

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if you were involved in any groups such as bar associations or community efforts, those groups and their members should be counted as contacts.

Your firm may have a CRM (customer relationship management) database that at its most basic will help show which partner has contacts at which companies. Even if there is no established database, that shouldn't stop you from organizing your contacts in one spot. These contacts can be kept in an email address book, programs like Hubspot or LinkedIn, or even in a simple spreadsheet.

Consider Your Prospects

While existing clients need to come first, it's also important to have an eye focused on the future. As a new partner, you should think about the type of practice you want to have and what types of clients and companies you want to represent. One way to begin doing this is to create a list of contacts who you think have the greatest potential to become clients or referral sources. You should keep the list on your desk or pin it to a bulletin board and review it on a regular basis. It's important that you create a system that's easy to manage. By doing this, you can ask yourself on a regular basis, "What have I done to keep up with this person, and how can I help this person in his or her career or personal life?"

Practice Your Presentation Skills

New partners will be making countless presentations: talks before groups of the firm's other partners and presentations to clients, prospects, and industry forums. Presentation skills coaching can mean a huge difference in building your confidence by giving you the tools to enter into a more public forum and cultivate a reputation. In addition, watch TED talks, download some of history's greatest speeches, or listen to the firm's most respected public speakers.

Don't Neglect Your Social Media

Regardless of what you think of social media, it is here to stay. A recent BTI Consulting report shows that nearly 70% of corporate counsel use LinkedIn. As a new partner, you should make sure that your profile is up to date with current information. Check your local bar association to make sure that your firm is working in accordance with any applicable rules.

According to Adrian Dayton, founder of ClearView Social,

> For most new partners it comes as a rude awakening that the game has changed. They can no longer simply provide support to busy partners, they now not only need to differentiate themselves on LinkedIn and in how they brand themselves, but they also need to make business development and profile building a major part of the way they work and function as a lawyer.

Dayton says, "LinkedIn isn't really about doing everything online, it is about providing constant contact to facilitate more in-person meetings. Every single day, lawyers should be logging on to LinkedIn to stay in touch, set meetings and constantly grow their network."[3]

I am not a believer of using LinkedIn with people whom I don't know, but I do think it is important to accept invitations from people whom I know. I also think that when extending invitations to connect with people via LinkedIn, it's vital to include a personal note mentioning how you know the person. It sets the tone for how you want to be known as a professional.

A picture is worth a thousand words, and as a new partner, the photo that you use on LinkedIn and for your firm bio makes a strong first impression. LinkedIn's research shows that just by having a picture, your profile is fourteen times more likely to be viewed by others.

After you've completed your profile, you should calendar a reminder to yourself every other month to look at your profile to make sure that you are keeping it up to date by adding articles or other upcoming events in which you are participating.

In Closing

There are many things that your fellow partners can do to support you, and if your firm is lucky enough to have one, your marketing department can be a great source for guidance and support. Meet with the marketing team, learn what has been successful in the past for others at the firm, and ask about what resources and ideas they have to help you. Once you've done that groundwork, it's up to you to define and work toward the future practice you deserve.

Deborah Farone is the Co-Chair of PLI's program All Star Business Development for Lawyers 2018 and is the author of PLI's forthcoming treatise *Best Practices: Business Development and Marketing for Law Firms*.

NOTES

1. Philipp Schmitt, Bernd Skiera, Christophe Van den Bulte, *Referral Programs and Customer Value*, 75 J. MKTG. 46–59 (Jan. 2011).
2. MALCOLM GLADWELL, OUTLIERS: THE STORY OF SUCCESS 42 (Little, Brown & Co. 2008).
3. *Id*.