

THE PENNSYLVANIA LAWYER

How To Get Clients

By Steven A. Meyerowitz

When Claire C. Obade, now a partner with Saul, Ewing, Remick & Saul in Philadelphia, joined the firm as an associate in 1981, she was told that her responsibility was to do excellent legal work and that the firm would always have clients. At that time, to the extent that Saul, Ewing actively sought out new business at all, it was the firm's partners -- more precisely, its more senior partners -- who golfed with and entertained corporate executives.

Of course, the environment for lawyers and law firms has changed a great deal in the past decade. Now, the question on the minds of all lawyers is: How can I get clients?

Unfortunately, there are no easy tips, sure-fire methods, formulas or game plans that are right for everyone. Whether attorneys in the mid-1990s, in a time of increasing competition and

client sophistication, regard practicing law as still primarily a profession, or as mostly a business, the only thing certain for every lawyer is that a healthy practice takes hard work.

In speaking with a wide range of successful lawyers and consultants, certain common client-development themes stand out. Here are five very broad steps that, if taken as a part of a regular, organized program, should help lawyers increase their practice.

1. Be known

A lawyer nobody knows is a lawyer nobody uses. Lawyers can no longer (if they ever could) just sit in their offices and wait for clients to call. Rather, lawyers have to make potential clients, referral sources, business executives, homeowners, community leaders and

other attorneys aware of their existence. According to Bob Donath, the head of a marketing consulting firm in New York's Westchester County, lawyers "have to have people recognize them and be known for the right things in the right circles."

There are a lot of ways to do that. Lawyers can distribute information about themselves and their practices through newsletters, brochures and news releases. They can send out reprints of their bylined articles from law reviews, law journals or trade journals, which is something Obade believes is particularly important for women attorneys, who, she says, find it more difficult to do the "social networking things" like golfing.

Increasing numbers of law firms are advertising to try to get the word out. David B. Kline of the law firm of

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Ostroff & Kline P.C. says his firm does a great deal of print advertising in the Yellow Pages and newspapers, which yields 70 percent of the firm's clients. A big supporter of advertising, Kline asserts that "no small firm can survive today without advertising."

Lawyers also can have others do the disseminating, such as by hiring a public-relations firm or by responding to a writer's or reporter's interview request.

It also is important to increase contact with people. To do that, lawyers could give speeches to trade or community groups. (If they are recorded, they can be made available to a future audience.) Lawyers also could join local organizations and, as Timothy F. Burke Jr. of Pittsburgh's Tener, Van Kirk, Wolf & Moore says, "Let people know that you are a lawyer."

Bennett Aaron, a partner with Philadelphia's Pepper, Hamilton & Scheetz, emphasizes that becoming active helps to develop a practice only when it is not a thinly disguised business development technique. Instead, it should be a genuine attempt to improve the community. Although it may be a rather long-term process to become well-known, lawyers who do not put down the important ground-level building blocks will not be able to reap the benefits later.

In addition to participating in community matters, lawyers should be active in local, state or national bar associations. Burke speaks on estates and trusts before such groups to attempt to

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gain a reputation as a knowledgeable person with the hope of obtaining referrals from lawyers who do not practice in that area.

Being involved in bar functions has worked as a client development tool for Janet S. Kole, a partner with Cohen, Shapiro, Polisher, Shiekman & Cohen of Philadelphia. She says she is quite active with the American Bar Association's Litigation Section, has gotten to know a lot of people and as a result has gotten referrals from a number of them.

There is another group of people with whom lawyers should regularly communicate: the other lawyers in their firm. In a firm of more than a few lawyers, all of the lawyers should make an effort to explain to each other what it is they do to enhance the likelihood of what has come to be known as "cross-selling."

For instance, Obade has prepared a capabilities statement describing her intellectual property practice, which she has given to lawyers in her firm. It contains a checklist of legal issues and the names of the group's lawyers to call when particular questions arise. Obade also explains the issues to the firm's lawyers, so they can spot them and call a lawyer in the intellectual property practice group when something comes up.

2. Have the right practice

For the first nine years of his career, Joseph M. Manko, a partner with

the Bala Cynwyd firm of Manko Gold & Katcher, was essentially a securities and corporate lawyer. But in the early 1970s, he left his firm and became general counsel to the Environmental Protection Agency's Region III. When he left the EPA and returned to private practice, environmental law was just taking hold. Now with his own boutique firm, he is an environmental law pioneer with a successful practice.

Glenn Fox, with Lansdale's Pearlstine/Salkin Associates, also has a niche of his own. In addition to his corporate and tax practices, he is a bond attorney. Because there are relatively few bond attorneys in Pennsylvania, he believes he is at a bit of an advantage.

Fortuitous? Perhaps. But being in the right place and having the right practice can be one of the most important aspects of getting new clients. It is really no surprise -- it is simply a variation on the supply-and-demand theme.

This is not to suggest, though, that lawyers should look at a list of "what's hot and what's not" and change their areas of practice just to get in on a growing field. But all other things being equal, an area with fewer lawyers and a large need or an area that appears to be destined for growth can be a good place to start to develop a practice.

3. Keep clients happy

Because it is easier to get new business from an existing client than it is to get a new client, one of the most impor-

tant methods of developing a practice is to keep existing clients happy. As Burke says, "A happy client sends us others; an upset client keeps away dozens."

A lawyer representing a client represents a person, whether the client is an individual, partnership, or corporation. How can the lawyer make the client happy?

Deborah Addis, a vice president with Massachusetts-based Addis & Reed Consulting Inc., believes that one of the most important things lawyers can do is to build relationships with clients. "Treat each client as if it is the most important. Be available and accessible. Provide good legal services and be their ally."

Manko says it is the "little things and the people kinds of things" that matter. Thus, he will send a client a congratulatory note when appropriate or a plant to someone opening a new office or store. And he will always try to return phone calls by the end of the day. He also gives clients his home phone number, telling them that he is available if needed. He rarely has a problem with overzealous clients calling his home too often, he adds.

Kline always tells clients when a case is over that if they ever have another legal question, they should call. He says that often clients do call back, and he might speak with them about their problem for 30 minutes. When they ask "How much do I owe you," I say "Nothing, but next time you hear somebody bashing lawyers, tell them

about this." The goodwill that engenders has led to numerous referrals, Kline says.

4. Bill right

One of the most important ways to keep clients happy, of course, is for them to be happy with their bills. Billing is such an important part of the attorney-client relationship, its significance cannot be overstated.

The common-sense rules of billing are rather straightforward. As Burke states, clients should be billed "quickly, fairly and intelligently." Lawyers should clearly explain what they are billing for; clients "don't want to get a bill 'for services rendered,' especially when the services were over a long period of time."

5. Be good

Lawyers used to say that doing good work was all that was necessary for clients to come through the door. Now, lawyers must do a lot of other things before they are retained. But that does not mean that good work is not a prerequisite. Indeed, it still is the most important thing. Martin D. Cohen, a partner with Cohen Feeley & Ortwein, says that he had "a couple of verdicts for more than \$1 million last year," which helps him get new business.

And in terms of the most important steps to take to attract new clients, Burke says, "The first thing is, do good work on a timely basis."