



BUSINESS GENERATION FOR ASSOCIATES: START SMALL, BUT START NOW

by **Betsy Munnell**

First, a Warning.

Many of the associates I have mentored and trained during my 30-year legal career (frustrated perhaps by the abundance of my suggestions for filling their non-billable time) have challenged me to summon up a single nugget of advice for building a successful and satisfying career as a lawyer. This is my answer, uttered in urgent tones:

Do not listen to anyone who, in your first few years of practice, or at any time thereafter, warns against spending otherwise billable hours building your network and personal reputation in the community. This deeply flawed advice is commonly offered up (all in good faith), not just by baby boomers, but by young partners over the age of 35 for whom “the best marketing is excellent legal work” may have been a pretty workable mantra. But they are struggling now, with the rest of the profession, to maintain and grow their practices, and should know much better than to discourage you from learning how to fend for yourself.

To put it another way:

*Any lawyer or professional development director who tells you to wait until your third or fourth year to learn the basics of business generation or to develop a networking strategy is **WRONG**. Follow his or her lead and you’ll fall behind your contemporaries in short order.*

The Fundamentals.

Trick answer, I’ll admit. A nugget is supposed to be just a sentence, or a few bullet points, like the lists you find in all the e-books or on the Power Point slides shown at your associate orientation or last month’s practice group presentation on “marketing.”

Since I can bullet point with the best of them, I’ll serve up a slide’s worth, consisting of the five elementary principles on which my colleagues and I based our marketing efforts. They still apply. Sadly, there are few professionals (and certainly no law schools) who will step forward to teach them.

- Being a great lawyer with a self-sustaining practice requires much more than superior work and service.

- For long-term success and satisfaction you must target (as early in your career as possible), two fundamental and interrelated goals:

The development of a distinguished and expansive reputation as lawyer and human being, and

The seeding of a varied network of talented, and ambitious, people in your community (and in other markets) as an ongoing source of advisors, allies and superior information, as well as direct referrals, new business and job opportunities.

- Developing business is all about building enduring relationships within your strategic network.
- To do so, you must listen carefully to these individuals, learn about them and their businesses and identify ways to offer value, professionally, personally or both.
- Strive to be, and to be known as, a source of superior information, connections, influence and wise counsel--perhaps even to become indispensable.

The problem? Time. We can all agree that time is short. You are under constant pressure to produce high quality work, and, I hope, you want “a life.” Nonetheless, it is essential that you do more--much more--than put your head down, churn out the best work possible, hit your hours target and make your bonus. This is true whether or not you intend to stay at your firm, or even in the law, for more than a few years.

Your law school taught you nothing at all about this topic. And, in all likelihood, such skills as your law firm elects to teach you will be insufficient to the task. In a down economy, and a profession undergoing potentially radical change, all law firm associates (including those claiming imminent “exit strategies”) must lock on to the fastest possible track to productivity, expertise, advancement and business generation. Time spent developing good marketing habits, and a broad and coherent business network, is a direct investment in your future.

The Game Plan.

The devil being in the proverbial details, let’s consider some specifics.

Your first step:

- Have a plan, establish the systems it requires and execute it.

Everyone does better with an outline, a To-Do or Task List, an Outlook calendar reminder. If you are serious about business development then you must have a business plan. It need not be grandiose. Depending on your level of experience and the breadth of your connections within your firm, the bar and the community, you may wish to limit your initial goals to building up a network, rather than randomly targeting prospects and giving chase.

If your firm has no program through which to develop a career plan, seek out your professional development or marketing director, a colleague worth emulating, a mentor, a coaching blog or a personal coach

and locate a few template business plans. Research and draft a detailed four month plan with specific, achievable goals. Finally, enlist someone you trust and respect to help monitor your progress.

At the very minimum, your plan should include:

- An “A” list of 10 to 15 key contacts you commit to develop for your network,
- A strategy for substantive participation in bar and community organizations offering leadership and other opportunities for visibility and networking,
- An “internal marketing” component designed to help you advance within your firm, and
- A “best practices” segment establishing the routines through which you will implement your plan.

The Infrastructure.

No matter how good your plan looks, it will collapse of its own weight unless incorporated in your daily routine, and to do that efficiently you will first need to establish guiding “systems” to support your efforts.

When I work with law firm associates to implement their business plans we first design two charts. (Some lawyers tack them to their bulletin boards or folder them next to the phone, but all that really matters is the daily discipline they impose.) One is the “Systems Set-Up” table, consisting of five

columns: “Coordinating with Support Staff”; “Address Book/A-List Database”; “News Management”; “Professional Associations”; and “Calendar.” To give you a sense for the chart’s content here are a few entries from one client’s “News Management” column:

Maintain online database of web news, Twitter follows & RSS/blog feeds (include industry and financial news via WSJ, Law.com, NYLawyer, Energy, Cleantech, Biomass blogs). Target and forward information of interest to A-List, environmental department partners & prospects.

The second chart, titled “Establishing a Routine,” covers daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly tasks. Here are a few items from the same associate’s “Daily” column:

Read web news feeds; note ‘current’ article/white paper/blog topics; clip articles for emails to A-Listers, dept. partners. Contact one A-Lister by phone and another by email. Answer all calls, emails by 5pm.

And from the same lawyer’s “Monthly” column:

Attend or present at PLI/NY Bar Assoc. conference/panels on “green” topics. Organize NY bar young lawyer’s event?

It never takes long to develop these charts. With a little careful thought each lawyer can build a workable routine in an hour or two. Remember: it’s not rocket science.

No Time Like the Present.

One final bullet:

- Be self-reliant. It's your career. No one is taking care of you.

No matter how demanding your obligations in the office, both billable and non-billable, it is essential that you protect your own future by building a strategic professional network and establishing your reputation both inside and outside your firm.

Getting a job, keeping it and finding the next one all require a record of excellence and a healthy network of both personal and professional contacts.

This is no time to get careless, and no time to depend on others to chart your career course. It's your life, and your responsibility.

Make it happen.

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Betsy Munnell provides innovative business development training and personal coaching to law firm associates and law students. A noted deal lawyer and proven business generator, Betsy brings to her work the wealth of knowledge she acquired as a partner for 25 years at Edwards Angell Palmer & Dodge. Betsy is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband and three daughters. Betsy can be reached at emunnell@munnellassociates.com and through her company website: www.munnellassociates.com.