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A PLACE TO MEET NEW BUSINESS

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Three fundamental goals of client development are meeting new prospects, developing relationships and staying in touch. One of the best methods for achieving all three goals is marketing through organizations.

Organizations are groups of people who have joined together for a common interest. They could be charitable, community, educational, religious, business or professional. Regardless of the type of organization, or its ultimate goal, properly selected organizations can produce the added benefit of new clients for the people who participate in them.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT ORGANIZATION

Of course, the benefit of acquiring new clients does not come without cost. Organizations require membership fees, contributions and, more importantly, time. Therefore, selecting the right organization is critical for success.

The first issue in choosing an appropriate organization is sharing its goal. It will be very difficult to willingly invest in an organization that does not further your own beliefs.

Next, the organization should contain a large percentage of your prospects in its membership. While the percentage will vary with the quality of the prospects and the amount of time and money required, a minimum of an 80 percent prospect presence is a good guide.

This is not to say that it's not a good idea to be involved in organizations that don't house prospects. It is certainly appropriate to do good without an ulterior motive. However, if the organization is identified for marketing purposes, the concentration of prospects should be high.

One of the best ways to choose an organization is to ask current clients and referral sources which organizations they favor. An inquiry of this kind will usually result in an invitation to attend a meeting. This approach is far superior to researching directories of organizations. There are thousands of organizations, and the likelihood of finding and penetrating the right one is reduced without a contact who can offer support.

An important issue that should guide your choice of an organization is the quality of its administration. It is frustrating to invest in an organization that is poorly managed. Furthermore, if your target organization is a charitable one, make sure the costs of administration do not significantly dilute donations. A 10 percent allocation of funds for administration should be the maximum for charitable organizations.

The process of finding a quality organization should not be rushed. It makes sense to check out as many as possible. Actually, the process never ends. As your career evolves, different organizations will suit your needs.

START YOUR OWN GROUP

If you can't find an organization that meets your needs, a valuable alternative is to create one. Many important and powerful organizations began as discussion groups or social gatherings.

The only requirement for starting an organization is a common need. If you can find one and form an organization, you will enjoy the benefit of being a founder. As the organization grows, your sphere of influence will grow along with your prestige.

Once you join an organization, the maximum benefit will be produced by active involvement. It is not enough to buy a ticket or even a table at the annual dinner. You need to meet the members and work with them on committees. As you do, you will learn their other interests and that will allow you to further each relationship. Also, as you interact, the members will get to know you, your beliefs, your strengths and your ability to serve them.

A common mistake in choosing an appropriate committee is assuming that the best committee is one that requires your legal skills. One option to consider is participating on the membership committee. An advantage to the membership committee is that it is always reaching out to prospective members, which is a continual opportunity for you to meet new people. Additionally, it offers access to all of the other members in a search for their suggestions and contacts.

Another valuable committee is the program committee. In this environment, you can identify important speakers who would be of interest to the group as well as your personal prospecting effort.

GET SUPPORT

While you may be actively participating in an organization, a serious problem in penetrating organizations is lack of support from a spouse or significant other. Organizations often require social interaction. There are dinners, outings and conventions. If a spouse is hesitant to participate, he or she should appreciate that while the experience may at first appear distasteful, in fact, organizations often result in close friendships. If friendship is not an adequate motive, another approach is a frank financial discussion. Organizations are important to success, and a lack of support could negatively impact your career.

In an effort to make the most of an organization, there are a variety of techniques you can use. Following is a partial list:

- Attend meetings regularly. Consistent attendance sends a message of interest and support. If you can't attend a meeting, always send an alternate. Effective client development requires regular, prolonged contact. It could take years to convert a prospect to a client. Persistent, positive interaction produces results.

- Get on the board ASAP. Attend meetings regularly. Your goal is to acquire authority and influence. The greater your power, the greater your exposure and therefore, your ability to influence prospective clients.

- Write articles for their publications. Most organizations have a newsletter or a magazine. These publications are read and the writers are considered authority figures. Reprints of published articles are both inexpensive and very effective marketing tools.

- Speak at meetings. Speaking is an opportunity to give value to larger numbers of members in less time. Quality speeches position you as an expert and instill confidence in you.

- Be an ambassador of good will. You can arrange to speak with your prospective clients, referral sources and the media under the authority of your organization.

- Follow through on your commitments. Just as success on a committee will enhance your reputation, failure to perform will be a negative marketing experience.

In addition to creating clients, organizations provide the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Organizations, with their politics, committees and programs, crave strong leadership. They require team-building and consensus-building skills. These skills transfer into other areas of your professional life. Climbing the organizational ladder is good practice for climbing the corporate ladder.

Acquiring new clients is a critical part of managing a practice. Limited time and resources make marketing a challenge. Organizations, with their structure, purpose and demographics, are one of the most effective marketing tools. They make marketing interesting, consistent and personally fulfilling. And, because they serve a common interest, they're an opportunity to do well by doing good.