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MARKETING YOUR LAW PRACTICE PART 3: MEETING NEW PROSPECTS

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In our last episode, I examined organizations as a way of meeting potential clients and referral sources. Today I'll explore some other ways.

Who should I market to?

Consider whether your prospects are potential clients themselves or people who might refer clients to you. In some specialties, marketing directly to potential clients is impractical. Advertising, for example, produces calls from many clients you don't want. Someone in your firm has to talk to the callers and gently but firmly turn them away.

Six billion people populate the Earth; perhaps several million of them inhabit your geographic area. Most do not qualify as good referral sources. Even if they did, you couldn't possibly market to them all. Focus your marketing on the smallest segment you can keep in touch with. Yet even within the market segment you decide on, not all prospects make the grade.

Identify the kinds of clients and cases you want by brainstorming the characteristics of your ideal clients. Then ponder who can refer them. For a specialized practice, look to other lawyers in specialties other than yours. For example, transactional lawyers can refer litigation and estate-planning clients; mental health professionals can refer divorce clients; physicians can refer injury cases, and accountants can refer a variety of clients. If you are willing to take smaller cases, established lawyers always need a competent lawyer for cases they don't want.

Evaluating individual prospects

Concentrate your time and energy on quality prospects. As you meet potential clients and referral sources, consider how likely each person is to become or to refer a quality client. Also evaluate the cost in time, money, and energy to develop that source, then balance the cost against the likely benefit. Good potential clients must need your services and have the ability—and the willingness—to pay for them. Use the 30-minute rule: would you happily spend 30 minutes on the phone with this person for no charge?

Pause before accepting the marketing overtures of others. An invitation to lunch might be presented as a marketing opportunity for you as well. But those who consider you a prospect may not be good prospects for you. If they suggest they will refer you clients, assess whether they can or will. Examples from my experience of people who rarely refer clients include financial planners, stockbrokers, and insurance agents. Although their expressed intention to send you clients may be sincere, they are not usually the people that their clients ask for referral to a lawyer.

Go where you can meet them.

Go to events that good prospects will attend, whether or not they would otherwise interest you. You are, for example, more likely to encounter the general counsel of a major corporation at a meeting of a trade association than at a model-railroad club.

Networking groups tempt lawyers who are uncomfortable promoting themselves because everyone in the group comes there to market. That, of course, is also the downside; you may meet mostly people who want referrals from you and are unable to reciprocate.

Leverage relationships.

Most of the people you already know you met through someone else. Who are those someone elses? Who do you know who can introduce you to good prospects? Browsing through your address book will remind you how you met the people you know and stimulate your thinking on how to meet others. If a friend knows a lawyer in a firm that does not practice your specialty, ask your friend to invite that lawyer to your next lunch. In matters with complex financial issues, you will meet your clients' accountants in due course. Working with them, you'll develop a potential referral source. Seize the opportunity to get to know them and earn their trust. In cases where you do not come in contact with your clients' accountants, ask for an introduction.

Consider joining an accountants' association or study group. Ask your own accountant about such groups and whether they have associate memberships for non-accountants. Attending their functions will not only help you do a better job on business-related matters, your presence will impress the accountants you meet with your awareness of accounting issues. So when they have clients to refer, they will think of you.

Alumni groups

Your college and law-school classmates are excellent potential clients and referral sources. Your common experience of having attended the same school at the same time makes it easier to approach classmates, even those you have not yet met. All colleges and law schools have alumni activities, newsletters, and databases. If you don't have access to a complete list, you can compile one from memory or from your

yearbook. With fellow alumni, as with everyone else, evaluate your prospects. A business lawyer in your city is a better referral source than an English teacher in a small town a thousand miles away.

Continuing education: more than education

When planning your continuing legal education, plan to take some courses in person. Taking courses online or by tape or CD saves time but isolates you. If, on the other hand, you actually attend the course, you can meet at least two new people—one on each side of you. Attending courses in subjects outside your field allows you to meet lawyers in those fields. They will be impressed that you take an interest in the issues that concern them. Attending CLE events in a neighboring county allows you to meet lawyers in your specialty who do not practice in your county.

Seminars

Speak at seminars. At all seminars where you speak, talk to the people in the audience before and after your panel and during breaks. Find out about them. Because you are a speaker, your audience will assume you are an expert on the subject of your presentation. And it's not just hype; if you are not an expert before the seminar, you'll be one by the time you prepare and present it. Speak on panels with other professionals such as accountants and appraisers and get to know your fellow panelists.

During your presentation, offer to send the audience something extra—an article, a summary of a new case, anything of value. Ask those interested to give you their cards after your presentation.

Speaking at seminars sponsored by others offers at least two advantages. The sponsor who chose you to speak vouches for your expertise. And someone else handles the logistics for you. Encourage the sponsor to send the flyer to as many people as possible, including those on your mailing list.

Seminars that you organize yourself demand more work, but the extra work may be worth it. You control who is invited and the subjects you cover. You are more visible. Your own seminars do not have to be grandiose; you can do something as simple as lunch in your conference room.

I met her. Now what?

Each time you meet someone, ask yourself, "Is this a quality prospect?" Asking that question forces you to decide whether to follow up with that person. Ask the same question when adding new people to your prospect list. If you decide that your new acquaintance is a good prospect, decide immediately on your followup.

Coming up

When you meet a good prospect, more work lies ahead. In later installments, I'll tell you how to build the trust of potential clients and referral sources, and how to keep track of them all.

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