How To Help Your Legal Practice Thrive As An LGBT Lawyer

Starting your own legal practice isn’t a cakewalk, but at times it can seem even more difficult if you don’t always feel welcomed with open arms by others in the industry as an LGBT professional. This is one of the reasons the LGBT Bar and the American Bar Association’s Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity produced Out and About: The LGBT Experience in the Legal Profession to tell the stories of 55 gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgender attorneys, academics and jurists.

I’ve written about the benefits of certifying your business as LGBT-owned but what are the best steps to navigate the legal industry as the owner of your own practice? Here are some of the book’s tips for being a successful LGBT lawyer on your own terms, while positively impacting those around you.

**Be out and visible to control your narrative.** It is still likely that you’ll be the first LGBT legal professional others encounter in the near future, whether you’re interacting with a potential client or a district judge. One of the best ways to establish a clear impression of yourself is to come out to those around you personally and professionally with a focus on continually remaining visible.

When you’re alerting others about yourself, you’re able to curate the circumstances, alleviate confusion and prevent others from telling your story incorrectly. Whether you’re a partner and founder of your own firm or run a solo practice, look for the right organic opportunities to signal others about yourself.
Garry Bevel, the Children’s Ombudsperson at the Office of the Children’s Ombudsperson/Jacksonville System of Care and previously the Deputy Diversity Officer at the American Bar Association, profiled in Out and About, came out in his personal essay he sent to various law schools to make it clear where he stood and to help navigate which schools would be most likely to accept him for who he was. Being yourself in the legal field can help be an example for others to follow, whether they are gay, bi, trans or straight.

Join LGBT friendly professional groups and associations. One way of easily being visible in your community is by joining a local LGBT affiliated organization. It’s one way of coming out without having to say it every time you’re entering a meeting, as well as an opportunity to network with other legal professionals in your area and potentially generate new business from like-minded colleagues and clients.

Dr. Jillian Weiss, also profiled in Out and About, is an attorney, law professor and owner of a firm dedicated to providing litigation services to transgender employees, often volunteers on the Board of Directors for Lambda Legal, the US’s oldest and largest legal organization working for the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, and people with HIV/AIDS.

Join a local LGBT bar association, set up your own committee within an existing program or start your own organization if there’s a gap. Whether you’re volunteering, networking or sharpening your legal skills, consider joining an organization on a local or national scale to concurrently participate in the LGBT community and grow your practice.

Bring your partner to legal functions, networking dinners and other professional events. A consistent theme throughout many of the profiled stories was how common a practice it is in the legal world to bring your significant other to work related events. In some instances, it drew more attention to the individual if they came alone, allowing for unnecessary ambiguity.

These social events act as an opportunity for some to easily come out, while also giving your colleagues, partners and clients a chance to learn
more about you as a well-rounded individual and your family outside the confines of the office and the courtroom.

A romantic partner isn’t a requirement to succeed in the legal industry, but if you are married or dating, it is an effective way of to broaden the horizons of others in low pressure setting.

**Find a mentor and return the favor to others.** Your network is crucial for your firm’s long-term success, which is why finding other mentors both LGBT and allies alike can both direct your efforts in the right direction and prepare you and your staff for unique experiences shared by the LGBT community.

*Carmelyn Malalis,* a lawyer and the Commissioner/Chair at the New York City Commission on Human Rights, recounted in *Out and About* how earlier in her career she sought out another lesbian of color who was a highly successful federal district judge for a coffee meeting.

The exchange was brief, but she found it to be an extremely comforting experience knowing that it was possible to succeed and be yourself despite the occasional prejudice of others. As a result, Malalis tries her best to meet with law students and new attorneys who are lesbians of color, women, lesbians and lawyers of color to provide advice to them as they traverse their own careers.

Follow Malalis’ lead by building relationships with a few mentors of your own in the legal space that have experience related to your discipline as well as outside your specific focus area. The old notion that having one mentor throughout your career is outdated as it is now essential to look to a team of supporters.

Don’t forget to support others as well by helping mentor individuals, LGBT or otherwise, as they can learn from your success and failures throughout their own careers.

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