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# *Introduction*

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This book collects 101 letters written by women who have founded law practices. The project began with invitations to these women to write about their decisions, experiences, and reflections in letters to other women thinking about starting their own firms. When collected into a whole, these letters became so much more than just advice.

Whether the reader browses the set or digests entire chapters in a sitting, unmistakable consensus emerges. In their personal voices, the writers reiterate key themes: Of becoming businesswomen. Of choosing a practice area true to their passions and to the high character they bring to the bar. Of controlling not only their days, but also their destinies. Of ambition in action.

The ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, in soliciting these letters, anticipated that the insights and experiences of women who have pioneered in founding a law practice would be both inspirational and filled with practical advice.

What was not anticipated was the power and narrative that would be created when the letters were compiled historically. Grouped chronologically, this collection implicitly portrays the profession's growth, the society's evolution, the economy's fortunes, and the periodic changes in business models of private practice. Explicitly, the collection of letters unites to reflect not only the drive of these women to practice law, but also the impact of those cultural changes on women in private practice.

In their total effect, therefore, the letters present a picture of the legal profession that the reader may recognize on a personal level—a profession that underestimates the power and grit of women lawyers, who comprise the essential half of the profession's talent still not at the table in traditional firms.

The reader will see here the ambitious and imaginative leading edge of the profession exploding traditional ideas about how law must be practiced. Amid the marketplace speculation over future business models for traditional law firms, this collection of voices and ventures establishes the economic force of individual lawyers who create new practices in the image of their values and aspirations. These individuals find business forms in which they can control and manage all of their responsibilities and succeed at the highest levels of the profession. These women lawyers—some over 35 years in practice—exemplify clear-eyed plans and the determination to establish legacy firms.

### ***The Origin and Arrangement of Letters***

The Commission solicited letters through an open process, seeking referrals to women who have founded firms, using online resources and open announcements to identify women-owned firms, and providing an invitation to women who asked. While this method of gathering letters was not designed to be scientific, the result nevertheless produced a remarkably broad selection of firms whose origins span six decades.

The letters appear here chronologically according to the date each writer started her woman-owned law practice. If two or more writers started in the same year, their letters are arranged by the year of their law degrees. The entire set is then grouped into chapters, which uncover and track the themes emerging from each historical period.

This manner of organization reveals a startling acceleration in the rate at which women are starting firms. The '50s and '60s each claim just one woman founder among our writers. In the '70s, seven of our writers founded firms. We have eight founders' letters from the '80s. From the '90s, we have 27. In the 2000s, 57 of our writers started their first woman-owned practice. The crescendo is plain. Further, even *within* the most recent period of 2000–2010 (plus the first day of 2011), the number of women's letters grows sharply through time, as shown in chapters 5, 6, and 7. Thirty-seven of the 101 writers founded their firms in the last six years, the years 2005–2010, and one of them on January 1, 2011. Clearly, women are increasingly starting their own firms in order to do it their own way.

This arrangement of letters reveals another notable trend: increasing proportions of women starting firms are, in fact, seasoned women lawyers with

significant practice histories. From the '50s through the '70s, nearly all of our founders started their own practices in the first decade after law school (chapter 1). The '80s hinted that more senior women would be doing so; three of our eight writers started their firms more than 10 years out of law school (chapter 2). By the '90s a trend had started; our letters in that decade come from 10 graduates of the '90s, 15 of the '80s, and two of the '70s (chapters 3 and 4). In the latest period from 2000 to the most recent 2011 writer, the founders graduated in years across all the relevant decades: 12 in the 2000s, 23 in the 1990s, 16 in the 1980s, and six in the 1970s (chapters 5, 6, and 7).

The economic success of founding a firm is more assured now, and the movement to found firms appeals to women lawyers across generations. The numbers reflect, for women-owned firms, a marketplace come of age.

### ***Emergent Themes***

The letters are highly individual in tone and content. The writers explain the individuality of their letters through the context of their own prior experience.

Writers who founded their firms as senior practitioners speak with a longer perspective, strategically using their experience in practice and confidence at the bar to plan their success. The clarity of a founder's reasons for breaking out seems to increase as the writer reflects back upon her experience from a greater distance.

Junior women founders—including notably the first movers whose letters start this book—have moved forward without preconceived notions, fashioning both their business models and their practices to meet their visions and their needs. Still new to their decision to start on the road to independence, they nevertheless show great resolve about their decision.

Women with law degrees from other countries appear and show their own angle on starting a practice. They move gracefully between countries and legal cultures, reminding us not to adopt a myopic view of American practice.

Not all of the writers still operate the firms or practices they describe here. Their reasons for moving on—acquisition, merger, change in direction, retirement, and others—bespeak the strength and lasting independence that is gained by having formed the new venture. Some who have moved on regard it as a profound experience, one that is individualistic, inspired, and instrumental to the formation of what followed in their careers.

Across the age groups, however, the strong majority of these writers remain in practice. Indeed, some continue into retirement, and some envision a lasting enterprise that continues after they as founders have stopped. The ambition of the population of founding women firm owners is obvious—and long-lived.

Across the individuality of these letters in tone and content, there appears a unifying arc of time, which marks changes in the profession itself. Assembling the letters by the year the women started their first firm—as described above—yields a remarkable set of insights. Popular movements, such as the equal rights movement in the 1970s, show their strong influence. Rises and declines in the nation’s economic vibrancy are evident. The impact of law firm growth into very large organizations is palpable. But more than that, the resulting fabric of these writers’ perspectives portrays the impact of that evolution on women. That impact is summarized in each chapter’s introduction.

Collectively, against this backdrop of an ever-changing legal profession, the letters convey visionary insights, advice about using ambition, strength in understanding the power of independence, and frustrations about exercising that power in a largely male or monolithic organization.

### ***Practical Advice***

Throughout the book, the reader will find business-savvy tidbits and practical tips for starting and growing a successful law business. This collection does not try to be complete or authoritative on that subject. Manuals other than this book provide a comprehensive “how-to” compendium of the managerial steps to start a practice. Instead, the collection offers “nuts and bolts” of beginning and managing a practice in the words of the founders themselves. The reader learns those suggestions in the context of why it was important to the writer, as a part of her reflections about her decision to break out, and how she engineered her pathway toward success given her starting point.

The management suggestions in all of the chapters are of current interest because regardless of when a writer founded her firm, she composed her practical advice after the spring of 2010, using the modern lens of today’s business environment. The reader is urged to review the entire collection for practical advice such as the following:

- collect information early, including sources of fees, market trends, and definitions of the new firm’s practice scope

- start modestly with inexpensive offices; hire slowly
- carefully plan and budget, both before starting and throughout the business cycles
- technology is an important partner; invest in it properly and early
- creative financing is available; find good bankers and trustworthy advisors
- ask for business; use creative fee structures
- reach out to colleagues for advice, help, friendship, and coaching; prepare to be surprised at how many respect your work and want to help
- do not burn bridges
- develop the habit of communicating frequently to the marketplace and your contacts
- opportunities are everywhere; learn to see them.

The writers, offering these and other points of advice, thus tell how they created routines and reaped rewards.

### ***Some Observations and Take-Aways***

The implication of the collected letters is to urge the reader to proceed, to venture, and to plan as much as possible, but to unstintingly move forward in creating her own practice if that is her goal. These writers teach us that ambition, the need for more flexibility, the desire for control, and the excitement of creating a legacy drive women to found law firms. They tell the story of courage and of faith in the eventual success of their law firm businesses.

The letters also form the unmistakable impression that the profession will continue to see significant numbers of new practices founded by women—not only recent law grads, but also increasingly women who leave established traditional practices and big firms or who see a smarter, faster, more facile method of doing business.

These are the voices of women happy with their practices, grateful for what they have learned, proud of what they have achieved, and philosophical about their hard work. They find balance in the challenges, because they own their chosen solutions.

We hope you enjoy their letters.