Going solo? Go niche!
Why Selecting a Niche Practice Over a General Practice is a Favorable Option for a New (or Any Solo) Attorney
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August 2012

Opening your own business is scary. It's a decision not to be taken lightly and one that will change your life forever, hopefully for the better. For me, an attorney three years out of law school with minimal practical experience, the proverbial jury is still out on the latter. I can report, though, that, since opening my own law firm, my life is dramatically more energized, driven, and focused.

If you, too, are thinking of going solo and hanging your own shingle, a foundational understanding you must come to terms with, no matter your age or experience, is that it is not the practice of law that should give a person second thoughts. You learned how to be a good lawyer in law school. If you have never owned or run a business before, what should give you pause is the fact that you are opening your own business. So start before you start, by planning smart: carve out your practice niche!

As in any other business, instead of making a product or service, and then trying to find a market to sell it to, do the opposite: locate a market (i.e. define your customer), and then provide something targeted at that market. When you are looking for “anyone,” you will find no one. But when you are looking for someone in particular, you will find them (and they you). Knowing who you are looking for makes your whole game plan easier, from search engine optimization to selecting which networking events to attend in real life. You know which websites your targets go to; you know which events they will attend; and you know which services are complimentary to yours (hello, referral sources, can I buy you a coffee?).

For lack of a better example, I will offer my own. In 2008, while still in law school, I created the Maine Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts (Maine VLA) with a friend. With so many artists, a lot of them poor, there was a need in my city for pro bono legal services for artists. I loved helping people, I loved fun businesses and big ideas, and I loved intellectual property law. So for the past four years, I’ve been close to this rapidly growing “creative economy” in Maine, I’ve made some great connections, and I’ve been paying attention to trends. However, while I have referred thousands of dollars of legal services to other fine lawyers, I have never been a part of that community as a practicing attorney.

Fast-forward to May 2012. As the next stage of my life approached, it became clear to me that I truly wanted to use my law degree as a practicing attorney. But, the question became, how? I had a total of four months of private practice under my belt followed by three and a half years of non-profit management, freelance business consulting, and unemployment. In an economy trying to find its
bearings and with hundreds of exceptional attorneys freshly out of work, or newly welcomed to this cold market, you can do the math: I was unhirable.

So I looked around at what I had—a lot of connections in the arts and creative economy; what I loved—helping people leverage their IP and grow their businesses by working smarter not harder; what I wanted—to be my own boss, work from home some of the time, and create my own schedule; and what I was capable of—helping other people’s businesses by zealously and passionately counseling their growth. It only made sense to hang a shingle and essentially create a for-profit law firm that does what Maine VLA does. My firm opened for business on June 1, 2012, and, it turns out, I was onto something.

Instead of hanging a “General Practice” shingle and taking anything that comes in the door, I have a sense for the type of work I want to do, and I attract that type of work. Even though I am not one hundred percent sure that I know down-pat every legal issue (and the solution therefor) in my practice areas, I have plenty of time to learn. In short order, I am now seen as “the creative economy lawyer” and people come to me as an expert in my field. It’s quite powerful and has led to me being offered speaking engagements and involvement in exciting projects that never would have availed themselves to me if I were holding out a general practice shingle.

From a business perspective, I am able to be a vital referral source for other attorneys who do not practice entertainment law and other professionals in general, and it makes it very easy for me to tell other people exactly what type of client I am looking for. If someone asks you, “what type of client could I send your way?” and you answer, “anyone,” I can almost guarantee that you will not get any referrals from that person.

Okay, so you are convinced (hopefully), niche market it is! Let’s get practical. Approach a law practice like any other new business by researching your markets, deciding on a niche, branding your company, and marketing to that target niche. Here are some practical considerations and action items to finding and introducing yourself to a market that works for you:

1. **List the types of law that you enjoy.** If you haven’t dabbled in certain areas and thus can’t count them out, do a *pro bono* case for a legal services provider to get a feel. See if some of your areas relate to one another, and put those on the same line. Eliminate any field of law that requires a team of lawyers: environmental, anything class-action related, anything where the main clients will be multi-national corporations.
2. **Find your target markets.** Where is the unmet need, or where is there room for you? Who uses these types of law? First, use your brain and list as many potential client types as you can (these can be job titles, personality types, or life/business phases). Are those growing or shrinking markets? Then use LinkedIn and online forums to search for those people exactly, or anyone talking about your area of law. Cross search this with the states in which you are barred. Along the way, record keywords that people are using with regularity.

3. **Evaluate the competition.** Ignore big firms. Your competition is other one- to five-attorney shops. What do their websites look like? Do they buy a lot of print ads (not a good indicator of anything, but good to know)? Have they hired anyone new in the past six months (could mean increased demand)? Evaluate the search volume and competition in your geographic area of the keywords.

4. **Make a decision.** Once you commit and feel as though your decision is informed, go for it with all you’ve got. Use your keywords, focus on a few areas of law that are essential to your target market and network with other attorneys (especially those at big firms, they will be happy to help you). Attend events, teach seminars, and join some groups with your new firm (Chamber, a nonprofit board, etc.).

5. **Establish your philosophies, and share them wildly.** One of the excuses I gave for not going into private practice was that I felt uncomfortable with the billable hour and the inherent conflict that exists between clients wanting their lawyers to be efficient, and lawyers needing to bill more to make more. I turned that on its head and embraced it. Now I use this as a strength and something that sets me apart from other lawyers: I am incredibly liberal with my time, my rate is very low ($125), and I do not bill for all of the time I spend on client matters. Instead, I create a deep trusting relationship with my clients and ask them to refer me when they have an opportunity. I do not rush meetings and I answer questions when asked.

6. **Speak the language of your target market.** Don’t speak lawyer, or business person, or press release. Be you, but speak in a language that resonates with your target. Do a focus group, read relevant magazines or newspaper articles. Answer this question: what do “ideal results” look like, sound like, feel like to your target market? Then, promise to do that without violating the rules of ethics.

7. **Develop your brand.** It’s okay to have a nice logo for your law firm, and to not use your last name as the name of it. I chose Opticliff, a fanciful term because it will be easy to trademark, there will never be bickering about whose name goes on the door, and if I ever need to remove myself from the practice, it’ll be that much easier to maintain the brand identity. Plus the word, along with my colorful logo, resonates with artists and innovators. Like any other new product or service you need some name recognition, so find your spots and get out there!
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