

How Lawyer Referral Services and Proactive Client Relations Can Anchor Lawyers

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The news and the lawyer blogs are replete with stories regarding large- and mid-sized law firms laying off scores of attorneys. The newly-disenfranchised attorneys, along with the many solo or small-firm practitioners, often face the question of how to marry the practice of law with the business of law, and how to make their law practice a profitable endeavor, in difficult economic times.

Despite the dire news and the tough economic times, there are a number of ways that attorneys, either newly displaced or operating in a small firm, can build their law practice. The most prominent practice development tool in those situations is joining your state or local lawyer referral service, which will immediately connect you with potential clients who are looking for legal representation in your field of expertise. In addition, practice development is achieved through continuing to invest in marketing your practice, reconnecting with dead files or dead ends, and treating every client touch as an opportunity.

Access Your Local Resources

One of the best ways to develop your practice, whether you are newly displaced or looking to supplement a continuing practice, is to join organizations that have a client base ready for your expertise. Contact your state or local bar and ask about its lawyer referral service. These organizations take calls from potential clients and match the client's needs with lawyers in that particular practice area. For a small fee, you can join the

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roster of available attorneys who will be referred cases in practice areas that you choose.

When I left a large firm and started a small firm with two other partners, I joined the lawyer referral service in my state, and found it to be an invaluable part of my practice. While many of the calls that I took from the lawyer referral service were from potential clients whose legal matter required only a quick answer or was not yet ready for legal representation, I have retained some tremendous clients through the lawyer referral service, clients whose legal needs have sometimes expanded beyond the discrete project they first encountered. For those matters that didn't provide an instant client, I had a valuable networking opportunity with a potential client.

I was initially skeptical at the type of client that I could retain through my lawyer referral service, myopically thinking that any sophisticated individual would have access to a lawyer or a network of lawyers from which to choose. I quickly learned that individuals and businesses look to their local lawyer referral service as a clearinghouse, where

they are likely to get a qualified practitioner who has been vetted for their expertise in a particular area and their willingness to take calls. This eliminates two common hurdles that clients face when trying to obtain legal representation.

A snapshot of LRIS cases that have been referred to me over the years highlights the integral part that LRIS plays in my practice and its continued growth. These cases include: contract disputes involving out-of-state entities being dragged into court in my state by long-arm statutes; incorporation and continued legal representation of start-ups; complex disputes involving landowners; employment based disputes; and many other clients.

In one particular instance, I represented a good-sized company from another state that was forced to defend a litigation in Maine. I asked the client's chief officer why they had gone through the LRIS, rather than seeking advice from his local counsel. He stated that he expected the LRIS to have done a thorough job screening its panelists, and he trusted that system as opposed to having one of his attorneys refer it to a colleague from another state who perhaps was not vetted as thoroughly.

The lawyer referral service is the first place that a newly-displaced or small practitioner should turn to develop his or her practice. While each referral will not yield a paying client, you will be constantly expanding your client and potential client list, while also performing a valuable public service. To give

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you an idea of how valuable I believe LRIS is to our firm, both from the standpoint of client development and retention as well public service, each attorney that we hire is required to join LRIS, and all have indicated that it is an important part of their practice.

Beyond the lawyer referral service, your state or local bar also offers networking events that are great opportunities for newly-displaced lawyers and small-firm practitioners. For many practitioners, a sizable amount of their legal work will come as a result of referrals from other attorneys. In addition, you will likely receive a fair number of inquiries that are outside of your practice area, so you will want to develop a stable of lawyers that you trust for referrals of valued clients and potential clients. Lawyer to lawyer networking events allow you to meet other practitioners, and allow you to get the word out about your practice. Attend these functions as often as possible and follow-up with a personal contact after the event.

Market, Market, Market

I recently spoke at a CLE on building your law practice. One question I was asked was what my budget was for marketing. The answer was “unlimited.” It is imperative that you publicize your practice areas and availability. The law is a competitive field, and you want to be able to distinguish your practice. While the money we dedicate to marketing is unlimited, we are particular about the marketing we do. Find a marketing approach that works for you. For some people, that will mean print, internet, radio, television or other media. For others, that will mean personal contact marketing, through individual

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client (or potential client) meals, attending sporting events or social events with clients, or attending client functions. A perfect example of this would be a client's fundraising event. One of the ways that non-profits tend to raise their funds is through charity events, like auctions or dinners. Attending these events is a great way to support your client and raise money for their cause. It is also a great way for you to meet new clients!

Raise the Dead

In the parlance of our office, dead files are those files that have not been touched in quite some time, and for which the work on the matter is completed. Dead ends are those calls we took that did not result in a client. Despite the “dead” characterization, both of these can be useful. On the rare occasion when there is down time, go through your list of dead files or dead ends. Follow up with the clients for which the work has already been performed. In many instances, those clients will have legal needs again, and maintaining a cordial contact is enough for them to recall the good work you have done previously. In reviewing the dead end file, are there any of those potential clients for whom you advised waiting before proceeding into legal representation, perhaps because their matter was far from ripe? Sending a hand-written note or a personalized email to

those clients is a great way to maintain contact.

There's No Such Thing as a “Waste of Time” Client Meeting

This past week, I had a meeting with one of my associates and a potential client. The associate had brought the client in, and wanted me to sit in on a meeting because the subject matter trained on a particular area in which I had a great deal of experience. The meeting was not fruitful from the standpoint of gaining a client. The potential client's case was thin, and we advised the potential client against pursuing any legal action. After the meeting, the associate apologized for wasting my time. Far from being a waste of time, I considered that meeting a positive meeting. We had met a potential client, we had exhibited our legal acumen, and we had helped someone understand the law better. While that particular meeting did not produce an immediate client, we dealt with the potential client in a professional and friendly way, and I am certain that should that individual have future legal needs, we will get the call. Don't burn bridges when the initial client meeting is not fruitful; treat it as an investment.

While tough economic times pose challenges for lawyers in small firms or newly-displaced lawyers, those challenges are not insurmountable. By accessing the resources available through the ABA and your state and local bars, and by accessing the resources in your own office, you can create, maintain, and grow your practice.

Gregg Frame is a founding member of Taylor, McCormack & Frame, LLC in Portland, Maine, where he focuses his practice on labor and employment law, corporate law, and litigation. Mr. Frame is also a member of the ABA Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service and a Board Member and panelist of the Maine LRIS.