

How I Made Rain in Less Than Two Months on the Job

By Sarah P. Bryan

Like most young associates, I spend my days at work preoccupied with dotting my i's and crossing my t's. I triple-proofread every memo I write and Shepardize every case I cite. Doing my best and serving my clients well are my top priorities; business development is not foremost on my mind.

Yet I have found that business opportunities can present themselves when you least expect them, if you are able to recognize a business need and offer to fulfill it.

For example, one night after work, I decided to take some time to socialize and have dinner with a friend from my undergraduate days. I had not spoken with him since we graduated over five years ago. "Adam" is a pediatric resident at a Philadelphia hospital.

Over the course of dinner, Adam told me about the woman he was hoping to marry, who was a non-U.S. citizen living abroad. A week later, I received an e-mail announcing their engagement and inviting me to the wedding.

Immediately, my business-development antennae went up. Did he need immigration help? I called him with my congratulations and asked him to call me if he needed help obtaining a green card for his fiancée because there was a great immigration attorney at my firm.

A few days later, Adam called. The two of us, along with my firm's immigration attorney, discussed Adam's needs and crafted a fixed-fee agreement. Presto! I became a rainmaker.

It is not a particularly large matter, and it won't bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars to the firm. But it gave me invaluable experience and confidence that, even as a young attorney, if I open my eyes, there are opportunities to make rain. Working for a large firm does not preclude you from bringing in small matters. Non-litigation, fixed-fee matters are prime opportunities for young associates to bring in business.

Perhaps you have a friend who wants to start a new business or purchase a home for the first time. Of course it is possible to do so without a lawyer's help, but an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. There are many advantages to having a lawyer; if you communicate these to your friend, you might be able to bring in a new client to your firm.

Additionally, your firm may be willing to negotiate a lower fixed-fee for a transactional matter. Under this arrangement, clients (like Adam, a young professional with a more limited budget than your average corporation) know ahead of time exactly how much the legal advice will cost and what they will receive for their money. Meanwhile, the responsible partner likely will have a sense of exactly how much time the matter will require. It is a safe and beneficial relationship for both parties.

Finally, to bring in business, it is important to be familiar with the type of work your firm can handle. If I had not known that my colleague is an immigration lawyer who routinely assists clients with green-card applications, it would have been harder to convince Adam that (1) a lawyer could be useful and (2) my firm was the one for the job.

In sum, you do not have to wait to gain experience to bring in business. Relying on the experience of your colleagues, you can bring in clients to your firm now. Keep your eyes peeled for ways that your firm can help your friends in small and unexpected ways.

Sarah P. Bryan is an associate in the Labor and Employment department at Montgomery, McCracken, Walker & Rhoads, LLP in Philadelphia. She can be contacted at sbryan@mmwr.com.