

# Planting the seeds of business development

By Deane B. Brown

The theme of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois for this bar year is Promoting Women Leaders in the Legal Community. If your legal community is a law firm, one of the keys to becoming a partner, and hence a leader, is having your own clients. Since developing a book of business does not happen overnight, as a young woman associate, you should begin planting the seeds of business development in the early years of your career.

Don't make the mistake of cocooning yourself in your office in order to bill legions of hours while thinking good legal thoughts. While excellent legal work and strong billable hours are undoubtedly critical to law firm success, the ability to generate business is one of the most important, yet overlooked, keys to advancement in private practice.

Lawyers are often reluctant to think of themselves as business people. After all, you went to law school, not business school. But good lawyers are, quite frankly, a dime a dozen. In this challenging economy, it is the rainmakers who are the ones in demand.

So how do you, as a young woman in the early years of your legal career, begin to develop business? There are a number of steps you should be taking now to generate business in the not-so-distant future. Here are some suggestions:

**Prepare an elevator speech.** Have a 30-second elevator speech prepared for telling people you meet what type of law you practice; what sets you apart from other lawyers; who are good referral sources for you; and what type of clients the firm has (i.e. large corporations, entrepreneurs, closely held companies, high net wealth individuals). You can say a lot in 30 seconds. Feel free to ask a partner to review your speech.

**Hand out business cards.** Always carry business cards with you and don't be shy about handing them out or asking others for their cards. You'd be surprised at how many people don't have a lawyer, don't know a lawyer or know someone who needs a lawyer.

**Become a leader of a bar association committee.** Don't just join a bar association such as the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, The Chicago Bar Association or the Illinois State Bar Association and attend an event here and there. Rather, join a committee, attend meetings regularly, actively participate in those meetings and volunteer to accept responsibility for the work of the committee. Get to know your fellow committee members and demonstrate to them that you are intelligent and accountable. After a few years of such participation, you will likely be asked to be a

leader of the committee or you can credibly volunteer to be a leader. Once you become a leader, people will see that you are smart, articulate and responsible and they will feel comfortable referring business to you.

**Cultivate relationships with other attorneys.**

Lawyers are great referral sources. If you are in a smaller firm, big firm lawyers may refer you a case that is not economical for them to handle at their billing rates. Other attorneys may refer you a case where there is a conflict or if they have a case outside of their practice area.

**Become involved in other networking or industry groups.** While it is important to network with other lawyers, it is equally important to meet people in other industries. Ask your clients to identify the industry groups

in which they participate. In addition, you should check out various chamber of commerce groups, which often host networking events open to the public. For women, there are countless networking options, such as the National Association of Women Business Owners and the Professional Women's Club of Chicago.

**Do lunch.** You can't network while eating lunch in your office every day. Make a commitment to go out to lunch at least once a week. Contact your classmates from high school, college or law school, invite them to lunch and be prepared to talk about your practice and the firm and to find out about their businesses. Or ask a family member or significant other if he or she knows anyone who might be a good business connection to take to lunch. Make sure you ask a lot of questions about the other person's work and what type of referrals would be beneficial to them and be a good listener. Don't forget to bring business cards and other marketing collateral with you. And remember to follow up with a thank-you note or e-mail, letting that person know how much you appreciate his or her taking the time to meet with you.

**Be a matchmaker.** When networking, it is important not only to make connections for yourself, but also to make connections for others. For example, if you meet someone in need of an accountant and your close friend happens to be a CPA, introduce them. People will appreciate your efforts and return the favor with a business referral some day.

**Publish or speak.** When you are working on a case and an interesting issue arises, save your research and use it to write an article for a bar journal or other publication which will not only publish your byline, but will include a short bio and photo. Or give a speech to a bar association seminar or other gathering of people on a topic in your practice area. Continuing legal education is still relatively new in Illinois and there are many good speaking opportunities out there, but you may need to seek them out. Not only will you obtain CLE credit, it will enhance your credibility as a knowledgeable attorney.

**Team up with a partner.** You may be thinking, I have only been practicing law for a few years so who is going to hire me? If you meet a prospective client, but you are concerned that you don't have enough experience to be retained, ask a partner to accompany you to a meeting

Brown — page 24

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## Brown

Continued from page 6

with that person. You can leverage the partner's experience in the practice area and make it clear to the potential client that you and the partner will be working together on the case. Always attend the first few client meetings, even if the matter is outside your practice area. This will help you stay connected with the client and will help you develop a relationship with the client contact. You will still be perceived as a business generator notwithstanding the partner's participation in securing the client.

**Ask satisfied clients for referrals.**  
Word of mouth from a satisfied client is a

great referral source for business. Don't be shy about asking the client if he or she knows other people who may need any of the firm's legal services — both in your practice area and in other areas. Give the client a firm brochure or other marketing information as well as the website address and take the time to talk to the client about the other practice areas in the firm. In other words, cross-sell!

Be patient and don't be discouraged. Business generation does not happen instantly. Just keep planting those seeds now and your business will grow in the future.