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Perfect Pitch... and Other Methods of Business Development

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Given that women have not joined the legal profession in large numbers until relatively recently, the absence of long-established business development networks is one of the unique business development challenges they face. This article discusses the process of building and maintaining clients, and provides practical tips about how women, in particular, may do this successfully. In addition, it focuses on how professional and personal networks can help you achieve your business development goals.

Developing New Clients

The first challenge to developing new clients is identifying them. Your professional and personal networks are a good starting point. For example, consider whether your law school classmates or former work colleagues have positions that may have turned them into prospective clients. Also, consider whether your participation in



professional or other organizations offers opportunities to identify prospective clients. Membership in organizations that focus on the advancement of women or women's issues may be a particularly effective way to expand your professional and personal networks. Once you've identified a prospective client, it is time to "pitch" them to hire you.

Figure out how pitch teams are assembled at your organization. Ask your mentor about the process for building these teams. Alternatively, you can speak with the head of your department or the people responsible for business development. Approach these discussions as "mini pitches" to be on the pitch team. Focus on those opportunities that involve situations where you bring expertise to the team, and be prepared to demonstrate your ability to contribute. It is good practice to review your professional biography at least once a quarter to



ensure that it is current. You may want to consider tailoring it to particular situations or pitches.

Be prepared for the pitch. Spend the time to understand your prospective client's business. Read the prospective client's Web site, public disclosure documents (e.g., Securities and Exchange Commission filings and annual reports) and marketing materials. In addition, be knowledgeable about trends in your prospective client's industry. Once you're on the pitch team, ask questions about the prospective client's legal needs and the risks facing their business. Try to find out what keeps the key business and legal people awake at night. For example, ask the general counsel about the most significant issue the prospective client faced in the prior year and ascertain

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what his or her legal objectives are for the coming year.

Even if your team is not selected, stay in touch with the prospective client. They may need a different law firm if primary counsel is conflicted. You want to be well positioned if that happens.

Professional Reputation

Developing a professional reputation is particularly important for women. Being a recognized leader in your chosen field will help a client who might otherwise choose someone else for an assignment feel comfortable hiring a woman. Since there are more women in the law who are younger than their male counterparts, a well-developed professional reputation adds to your credibility. The time you dedicate to building your professional reputation will be well spent. Some practical ways to enhance your professional reputation include publishing and speaking at conferences or participating on panels sponsored by industry groups.

When seeking to publish, focus on professional or industry publications that are well respected in your field. Ask your clients what publications they read. Select a target audience and write the piece with a view to speaking to that audience. For example, a piece written for dealmakers will likely have a different focus than a piece written for a board of directors. This often means a conversation with the editor to find out who reads the publication and determine what types of articles are suitable for that publication, be it interpreting current developments or technical/educational topics.

Identify speaking opportunities at conferences that focus on your area of expertise. Ask your clients which conferences they attend. Your professional and personal networks may be useful in securing invitations to participate in conferences or speak on panels. If you hear that a former colleague is chairing a conference, you may be able to obtain an invitation to participate by contacting that person. When participating in these conferences, be prepared with practical advice, not just a recitation of the law. For example, if you are giving a presentation on how to take or defend a deposition, include techniques for anticipating

and addressing problematic questions that may arise.

Working With Clients

It is important that your clients have confidence in you. To encourage them to rely on you, return phone calls and e-mails promptly. Opt to use the phone to communicate from time to time. E-mail can be impersonal, and generally you can learn more about your client's needs from a phone conversation, which more readily lends itself to the client's asking additional questions that may expand your relationship. In addition, you want your client to be familiar with your voice so he or she can identify you (and your advice) on a large conference call. This is particularly important for women, whose voices invariably will sound different from many of the other voices on the phone.

Being proactive in addressing legal issues relevant to your representation and doing your best to troubleshoot helps inspire clients' confidence. For example, if you anticipate a big issue on a transaction, don't let your client be blindsided by it. In litigation, if a sensitive document has to be produced, warn your client in advance, and make sure they understand why it has to be produced and the implications involved in doing so.

You can gain the confidence of your clients by understanding their business and actively supporting it. If you are working on a litigation matter involving a contract dispute and discover that all the contracts, even those covering the same subject matter, are different, suggest a review of existing contracts and the use of a form agreement going forward to harmonize provisions and improve efficiency. Of course, there is always the tried and true method of inspiring confidence: provide superior client service.

Nurturing the Relationship

Once you've worked with a client on a matter, it is important to nurture the client relationship. To do so, find some common ground. There may be a leisure

activity that both you and your client can enjoy. It doesn't necessarily have to be golf or a sporting event. It could be the theater, the movies, or perhaps a special exhibit of mutual interest or an annual event of some kind. Inviting a client to attend an event with you may seem awkward at first, but one way to set the right tone is to suggest a lunch where your team gets to know a team from the client. This is an easy way to break the ice and make numerous connections with your client. Another way to build the relationship, although it may seem simple, is to remember big events (e.g., a child's graduation from high school), send holiday cards and inquire about particular family members. If someone you are working with took the time to tell you about an event or problem they are having, a sick relative for example, it is appropriate to follow up discreetly with that individual, being particularly mindful of maintaining the confidence.

Another way to nurture a client relationship is to refer business to your clients, stay current on topics relevant to their business and communicate pertinent developments in a timely manner. Stay in touch with your client even after the particular matter on which you worked is over. If you notice a new development in the law or regulatory scheme that was relevant in your particular matter, send your client a note highlighting it.

Well-developed professional and personal networks can help you achieve your business development goals, from providing sources of prospective clients to helping you establish a professional reputation. The time you spend developing these networks will not only enhance your professional reputation, but also prove to be a vital component of your development as a successful lawyer. •

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