

Business Development for Associates: Do It Early and Often

A managing partner once told me that his law firm didn't allow associates to participate in marketing or business development activities of any kind, whether for their own practice development or with partners to pitch meetings. This intrigued (and saddened) me, so I asked why. "Well, because they're inexperienced at marketing and client-facing, and they don't know what to say, so we really just want them to focus on working for their first five to seven years." Umm, what?! And that attitude continues to be rooted in many firm cultures. The '80s called, and wants their "Members Only" jacket back.

I understand that having associates grow their knowledge via "minding and grinding" case files is part of understanding and being able to accurately describe the firm's work and capabilities, but I'm not sure that keeping them sheltered and unexposed is the answer, either. The firm's fear was that an associate might do or say something wrong while out in the marketplace. That they would describe the firm's work inaccurately or worse, make a false claim about its capabilities.

This is an outdated way to think about marketing and business development for associates, but sadly, it's still very common. The truth is that when marketing plans and activities are developed and supported creatively, associates can make a positive impact on the firm's client acquisition and brand awareness efforts.

You can imagine my next question for this managing partner: "So what are the requirements for an associate to elevate to partner?"

"Oh, they have to have origination credits and a book of business of at least \$300,000," he said. Seriously, give the '80s their "Members Only" jacket back.

Let Them Eat Cake

Associates can have their cake and eat it, too, when it comes to meeting billable hours and doing business development and marketing, despite traditional thinking. Firms should consider allowing associates (actually, all attorneys) to count business development activities toward their billable hour requirements, which motivates them to grow their book of business while eliminating the stress of having to choose between the two. Associates will incorporate their marketing and business development efforts in their day-to-day activities, which will make their marketing plans less daunting to pursue. More importantly, they will grow professionally and expand their practices while hitting their billable hours goals.



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Good Business Sense

Getting your associates involved in marketing and business development early and often makes good business sense for the firm. More boots on the ground means more **networking**, more connections and more awareness for the firm. More importantly, because the market for associates is the most competitive the legal industry has seen in years, it makes good **recruiting** sense. Law firms with a measured and supportive program for **attorney business development** and practice growth, such as coaching and training, have a considerable advantage over competitors for talent.

Don't limit the marketing and business development experience to just having an associate tag along with partners at pitch meetings. Firms should provide various business development training opportunities for associates as part of their professional development. Training should include how to establish and cultivate a network, and how to nurture relationships.

While associates should understand that revenue generation is an expectation as they elevate their position and role in the firm, they should not be expected to pursue an aggressive client acquisition plan in their first few years. Rather, they should be encouraged to lay the groundwork for cultivating a strong professional network early on in their careers.

Speaking of networks, a firm should never assume that just because associates are early in their legal careers, they don't have strong networks and connections. It's the 2020s and between law school and social media, younger generations have connections in spades. Those connections may one day be a hiring decision-maker. Associates who are outside counsel will be simultaneously growing their careers with their peers who are in-house counsel, so it's important that they maintain and foster their relationships.

Fresh Ideas

Associates bring more to the table than just being able to do the work and crank out the hours. They often have great ideas and a refreshingly common-sense approach to business development. For instance, I work with an associate who doesn't meet the years of experience qualification to join a professional networking/referral group, so she created her own group of her law school peers and they meet regularly to discuss mutual connections, referral opportunities, leadership and career development. On occasion, they let the partners of their respective firms attend. This is a great idea for fostering strong, loyal relationships and robust referral synergies early in the associate's career.

Firms that are supportive of their associates' career from all aspects – salary, benefits, a positive work environment and opportunities – should also encourage, support and provide business development training and guidance, and allow them the time to develop their skills to network, create relationships and effectively build their own books of business. The dividends pay off abundantly.

Want to learn more about how your firm can support associate business development? Contact me, Glennie Green, at ggreen@jaffepr.com.