

## Business Development Training— a Must for Law Firm Associates

By Tim W. Hrastar



The success and survival of a law firm depends on how effective it is in getting new business from existing clients and acquiring new clients. The future of a law firm depends on how well they train their current associates in the practice of business development.

A recent survey on business development and law firm associates, conducted by the Lawmarketing Portal and Sage Professional Development Institute, found that, "...firms place great importance on the business development skills of their associates. But ironically, 57% of law firms fail to provide them any training to generate new business." People don't learn business development through osmosis.

According to the survey 93% of respondents in general believe it is essential for associates to be able to develop business in order to be successful in the legal profession. So why aren't more firms providing this needed training for associate success? There are things individual associates and firms can both do to improve their business development training. Let me outline just three things individuals can do and three things firms can do that will get them on the track to success.

### Individual Business Development Program

A good business development program begins with the individual. Associates have to take the responsibility to train themselves to become proficient at business development. Don't wait around for the firm to act. Starting with a positive attitude is paramount—believe you can be good at it, then learn how to do it. Show initiative—it demonstrates a quality essential for making partner.

#### 1. Self-Study

The first is self study. This can be accomplished by attending CLE seminars and conferences on the subject, and reading a myriad of books and articles on business development. The sources

for these books and articles are obviously bookstores, websites, and libraries. Read general business books as well. The Law Practice Management section of the ABA is a great source for specific books as well as the monthly magazine "Law Practice." It's not expensive to join the section either, where you will enjoy discounts on the books they have to offer, and the monthly magazine.

#### 2. Find a Mentor and Coach

Getting help from someone who has been there and knows what to do to develop business will move you forward quickly in the learning process. And a mentor within, or even outside your firm, can help guide you in many areas of your career, not just business development. Look for a successful rainmaker and ask endless questions on what they do to develop business. Adapt their techniques to your behavioral style and personality. Perform business development activities and get feedback from them on the process. And remember, no question is stupid.

A coach can assist you in specific areas of your business development education. Coaches are teachers that help draw out your strengths and abilities and guide you in becoming better at developing business than you would be able to do on your own. And they do it to fit your style. Using a coach, like a mentor, will jump-start your business development education.

#### 3. Form an Associate Business Development Support Group

The third thing you can do is seek out colleagues who are in the relatively same stage of development you are in and form an informal group to exchange ideas and experiences, and share reading materials on your business development techniques. Getting support from peers can be an excellent boost to your ego and confidence. Sharing ideas helps build teamwork—you'll build a life-long network of support that you can call on throughout your



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entire career. That's good, because someday when you are leading the firm, you'll need that support.

### **Firm Business Development Program**

The firm's leadership can support business development training for associates informally at first, and then develop a more formal structure to become even more effective.

#### *1. Provide a Positive Climate for Business Development Training*

The first thing a firm needs for business development training is a positive attitude that emanates from the firm's leadership including; the managing partner, executive committee members, and so on. They need to emphasize and support the importance of business development, and not just talk about it. With the correct attitude anything is possible—to carry out a successful program it takes planning and implementation discipline.

#### *2. Provide Monetary Resources*

In addition to encouragement, the firm needs to provide resources in the form of compensation for training. It needs to provide in-house seminars, pay for bar memberships and cle programs, and other education materials—perhaps, for example, through the creation of a business development library. The firm needs to set up a curriculum that will guide associates from the basics of business development to the more advanced techniques, allowing them to generate business on their own. What gets rewarded gets done. Salary compensation needs to consider business development efforts—it's not just about billable hours! Rewarding business development activities is crucial for success.

#### *3. Provide Mentoring Opportunities*

At some point in time everyone needs to go from the 'training to the doing' stage. They actually need to generate business on their own, and the sooner in their career the better. Law is one of the few professions where associates are kept at arms length from clients for sometimes a couple of years before they are allowed to establish a true client relationship. Why waste all that time? Associates can be taught to develop their own client base within two years of starting practice, as long as they are mentored carefully by a senior partner who can guide them through the steps. After all when a lawyer learns their craft, they are doing it on the job. The same can be done for business development. You hired smart people—train them early and let them loose to help grow the firm.

To make this happen it requires diligent attention to each associate in the firm. That's why it's important to provide a system to develop this talent. Anytime a young associate leaves because they feel they aren't getting the support to grow professionally, a \$100,000 to \$150,000 flies out the door. By the way, studies have shown that more than 60% of the time young associates leave a firm because they were not getting mentored and trained.

If you think business development is important—do something about it. It's not necessarily that difficult, but it does take a positive attitude, planning, leadership, and perseverance in implementation.

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