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Summer Associates Outlook

Get Ready To Sell

Prepare for the marketing that lies ahead

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Sales? You are in law school because you want to be a lawyer, not a salesperson. If you go into private practice, however, you will be entering the world of sales.

Until recently, the legal industry didn't even use the word "sales." Over time, the once (and somewhat still) noble profession has been transformed into an ultra-competitive industry with economic pressures. More attorneys are vying to land fewer clients. Now, the words "marketing," "business development," "rainmaking," "networking," "client development" and even "sales" are commonplace in law firms. They all basically mean the same thing and serve the same purpose: to attract, service and keep clients in an effort to generate billable hours. The lifeblood of any firm is the ability to sell hours worked on cases, which is the primary way a firm generates revenue. Therefore, the firm needs to get and keep clients to sell its services to in order to thrive or at least survive. A firm relies on its sales force to get these clients, which includes all firm attorneys, even associates. In addi-

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tion to benefiting the firm, your ability to market and sell will significantly contribute to your success of becoming a partner and to the maximization of your own personal compensation.

It is important for you to remember these two things: reputation and relationships. The concept of marketing is quite simple if you look at it in this way. Those who tend to be considered "successful" at getting clients: 1) are well known for having an expertise in a particular area of law or industry, and 2) know a ton of people, including the "big players" in that area of law or industry. Understanding these two concepts is of crucial importance in understanding marketing. Building the required skills and creating the necessary plan is important to your success.

How will you learn the necessary skills to become an effective salesperson or marketer? Law schools are not focused on this part of your education and, quite frankly, neither are most law firms. In reality, you are left up to your own devices to figure it all out. Your summer associate experience is the perfect starting point. You will be in an environment where you can learn first-hand how marketing is done and can start to try your own system.

First, find a mentor. Upon arriving at your firm, try to identify which attorneys have large books of business and, preferably, those attorneys who practice in an area of law that most interests you. Try to learn who their clients are. Once identified, try to forge a relationship

with that attorney. Ask him a bunch of questions like, "how did you get this client?" "how do you sell legal services?" "what should I do to market myself immediately after law school?" etc. The point is to get first-hand knowledge from someone with direct selling experience and a proven track record of success. Learn from them. Most attorneys would love to share their success stories with an eager law student. Whether you ultimately work at this firm, maintain this new-found relationship by keeping in touch.

Next, learn to network. The summer will be filled with social and business activities. Attend each event and use the opportunity to develop networking skills. Don't worry if you feel uncomfortable, as most everyone does. Try to meet people and strike up a conversation. Find commonalities to discuss. One key to networking is to ask many questions so you can learn about the people you are meeting. (Another added benefit is that you will not have to do all of the talking). Keep an eye out for those people who seem comfortable. Try to learn from their behavior and even ask them for networking tips. As we all learned in grade school, the best way to learn is by asking questions.

Learn the value of time. In law school, you are probably overwhelmed and feel you have no time for anything but your studies. It gets worse when you are in the real world. Your summer legal experience will include working on matters, doing research, writing memos, etc. You will be attending educational sessions, and as mentioned, you will also be attending social functions. This offers a

glimpse, albeit still watered-down, of the time demands faced by an associate. Try to find time during the day to do some marketing. Have lunch with partners and associates to build relationships. Attend a bar association event to build networking skills and meet new people. Keep in touch with an undergrad classmate who happens to be running her family's business. Go to a local chamber of commerce business card exchange and meet two accountants (after all, you are going to be a tax lawyer someday). Offer to research a topic to be included in the firm's next labor and employment newsletter. Try to do at least one marketing item a day. This will teach you to value the time it takes to be successful at marketing. It will also help you avoid the bad habit of allowing your life being run by the billable hour. In practice and life, your time will be limited and marketing often falls to the bottom of the priority list. To be successful, you cannot let this happen, so learn the skills now.

Build relationships. As mentioned, marketing is about building relationships with people who can hire you and/or refer others to you. It has been said that an effective network requires a minimum of 800-1,200 contacts. That number seems huge — and it is. Start now. Create a database, rolodex, spreadsheet, etc., to keep an inventory of all of your relationships. Over the summer, you can easily add 30-50 contacts to your data-

base. The key is not just collecting names, but figuring out a way to keep the relationships going. Sometimes it can be as simple as sending an occasional e-mail or a birthday card. Again, you have to start sometime. You will be better off if you start today.

Create your bio. While it is understood that you do not need a bio now, begin to think about what you want yours to look like when you become a real-life lawyer. It is also understood that your bio will not be impressive at the start of your career, as you have little experience. That said, look at the firm's Web site. Look at who has impressive bios and what they have done to get such impressive bios. What organizations do these attorneys belong to? What particular experience or accomplishments do they highlight? Does the bio show that the attorney sees things from the client's perspective? How will you get there? This is food for thought...start thinking.

Utilize the in-house marketing department. Most larger firms these days have an in-house marketing department. Go to the marketing professional and ask to meet for a few minutes. Ask what the firm's strategic marketing plan is and how it gets implemented. Ask about the firm's practice or industry groups' marketing plans. Ask what resources are available for the firm's individual attorneys. Ask for some

advice, like what you can be doing right now to create a competitive advantage for yourself. At the very least, the marketing department should be able to provide you with additional resources, such as books on selling, information on how to create a marketing plan, and so forth.

Start mastering marketing skills now. While it is true that most firms want their young attorneys to learn essential lawyering skills such as analytical thinking, concise writing and persuasive verbal communications, it is also true that, one day soon, the firm will expect you to have the ability to get, keep and grow clients. If you do not recognize this now, you will face a disadvantage. Building the skills can take years, if not a career. That's why you need to start early.

Attorneys that have been practicing law for 20-plus years still say they did not go to law school to be a salesperson. Like it or not, know it or not, mastering these skills is really the only way to gain the prestige and financial success that most people strive to attain.

If you have realistic expectations, patience and persistence, you will find that marketing is just part of the job and you will reap the rewards over time. You will also find that knowing many people and being viewed as a leader in your field will bring you professional and personal satisfaction and freedom. ■