The Seven Urban Myths of Business Development

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Casual conversations on the phone, elevator babble, chatter as people gather 'round a conference table waiting for a meeting to start – these are all great ways to perpetuate inaccurate forms of what we call conventional wisdom and common knowledge about how to land clients. When said with enough authority and conviction, especially by senior members of the firm, these little factoids develop into the folklore we call urban myths. When taught inadvertently to associates, these seemingly harmless myths can be deadly to the building of a thriving practice. The sooner you set the record straight for your associates, the better. Here are some myths I've heard over the years and why we should steer clear of them.

Urban Myth #1

If I want to be a rainmaker, I should act like the firm's best rainmaker.

Makes logical sense -- get the partner who is great at bringing in new clients to teach the rest of us how it's done. Clone that rainmaker and we'll all be rich. If our rainmaker plays golf, likes to talk about sports, or goes drinking with the guys, we should do the same. The problem is, many of your lawyers don't golf, follow sports, or drink. What works for the rainmaker doesn't always work for others. Trying to make a firm full of people just like that rainmaker is like trying to teach an elephant ballet: you can teach it the steps, but in the end it's still an elephant.

Instead of trying to turn your elephants into dancers, you will best serve them by discovering what they are good at and building from there. Trying to get an associate who doesn't golf, follow sports, or hit the bars to take up these activities in the name of business development is going to result in a great deal of frustration and wasted time. What that associate really needs is an approach that meshes with his individual strengths and passions. If an associate likes to write, find publications in his practice area and have him interview targeted prospective clients and referral sources to begin building key relationships. If your associate is an IP lawyer with an interest in chemical engineering, suggest that he read publications or join groups of peers who have those same interests.

Urban Myth #2

The marketing department will take care of business development for me.

Thank goodness we don't have to do that marketing stuff. We found a marketing specialist, gave him a nice office and a lofty title, guided him toward the kind of clients we want, and now we can sit back to watch the new matters roll in. This is the fantasy many of us hope for, but it doesn't match up to reality.

The last mile of business development is all about building key relationships, as most clients want a direct relationship with the lawyer who will be working with them. The disconnect here is that many associates are lulled into thinking that by signing on with a big firm, someone else will build those relationships for them. This may work when being fed work as an associate; however, once you go through the portal of partnership, you're on your own. This "large law firm syndrome" will stifle business development efforts faster than just about anything else. Talk to laterals who have joined the firm from smaller boutiques or solos where they had to bring in work to survive. You'll find a healthy attitude about who should bear the responsibility of bringing in clients.

Marketing and business development directors play pivotal roles in law firms, but they simply can't build relationships on behalf of others. As stated by Catherine Alman MacDonagh, co-author of the recent ABA LPM book *The Law Firm Associate's Guide to Personal Marketing and Selling Skills*, "[M]arketing brings them to the door, selling brings them through it." Train and coach your associates to get out, meet people, and be at the right places at the right times. In the end, failure or success will depend on how much effort each lawyer puts in to these activities.

Urban Myth #3

Just join an industry group and the business will roll in.

You have an associate who likes to draft non-compete covenants for ecologically responsible backhoe distribution companies in Eastern Kern County, California. So all this associate has to do is find the Association of Ecologically Responsible Backhoe Distributors of Eastern Kern County, join the group, and watch the work start rolling in, right? Well, actually…not be a bad start. But, while focused industry groups can be a great source of referrals, make sure to remind your associate of the following pitfalls:

- That sucking sound you hear is your time. Make sure your expected return is commensurate with the amount of effort you put in.
- While it may seem like a good match on the website, it may not actually be a great place to encounter referral sources or prospective clients. If you are not meeting the right type of people, find another group.
- The group may be a haven for your competitors. If you find yourself giving a speech to people who do exactly the same thing you do and who are there just for CLE credit, find other venues.
- Don't limit yourself to being merely a participant, attendee, or member. Don't just show up at meetings and hope to develop clients over the chicken dinner. Become visible by being a leader, getting on the board, and making an impact. Be strategic by developing a list of people you want to meet and having some excuse to talk to them.
- Follow up after each meeting. Remember, the best dividends are paid on the work you do outside of the monthly meetings.

Urban Legend # 4

Each bio on the firm's website should list <u>all</u> representative work.

The bio should be designed to attract the type of work the associate wants to do. If 80% of that associate's work has been

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insurance coverage and 20% maritime but the desire is to build the maritime practice, emphasis should be placed on maritime. Put the maritime work first and cluster representative matters together in the first position. I know enough lawyers who have received calls based on their bios to understand that a well-crafted story is the bait that can attract the kind of clients you desire.

Urban Myth # 5

Responses to RFPs are the best opportunities for business development.

The key word here is "responses." The RFP process is all about responding rather than being proactive. Now, don't get me wrong, huge deals come to law firms through RFPs, and when your firm receives one, you should consider responding. However, if you plan to build a solid book of business based on waiting for the RFP gravy train to roll in, you will surely be disappointed.

Successful rainmakers will tell you that the best way to build a practice is to develop strong relationships with the right people before they have a need. To do that, you need to meet people face-to-face. Help as many people as possible, not just with legal advice and referrals, but also with some good old-fashioned help -- directions to a great fishing hole, referrals for a ballet teacher or a mechanic, suggestions for a restaurant or how to deal with a teenager … you get the idea. People with mutual interests genuinely helping one another through life builds trust and friendship, and friends eventually refer business or become good clients.

Back to the RFP. If you get one, remember, your response is just the beginning of your strategy. Use it as an opportunity to build a new relationship. You may not get this work, but continue the dialogue. Get to know your potential clients and let them get to know you. When the next opportunity arises, perhaps you can get an inside track or maybe even craft the RFP to meet your specifications. Many times this is how the RFP process unfolds; the RFP was actually written by your competition and your response is just one more hoop in the prospect's due diligence process. And how was your competition able to direct the RFP in their favor? Well, some time in advance of the RFP, they made a friend.

Urban Myth # 6

Business development is such a chore, but we have to do it to survive.

If it's painful, it won't be sustainable. More than likely, the associate who moans about business development is trying to follow some prepackaged set of steps based on someone else's notion about "how it's done." (See Myth #1.)

Consider this example from a recent coaching session. An associate wanted to start a new relationship with a prospective client; however, the idea of just picking up the phone and introducing herself was terrifying. The challenge was to explore alternative ways to accomplish this goal. Could she make the call jointly with a partner? Better, but still distasteful. Could she call someone else she knew at the client's office and ask for an introduction? Still awkward. As the process continued, we discovered her love of writing, which became a key component of her business development strategy. To overcome her reluctance, she decided to write an article she knew would be of particular interest to this person. She felt very comfortable calling him to ask for his opinion and insights on the topic. She made the call, arranged a lunch to talk about it, and achieved her goal of building the relationship. More important, the process was not only comfortable, it was enjoyable. Helping your associates learn how to do things their own way will reap great rewards for them and the firm.

Urban Myth #7

Lawyers are not natural marketers.

This one originates in the assumption that marketing people have different personalities than lawyers. In general, there is some truth to that. According to Dr. Larry Richard at Hildebrandt International, research over the last few years has shown that the most common traits of lawyers include analytical, detached, introverted, and reflective, while marketers are creative, enthusiastic, extroverted, and interactive. The study is helpful in confirming what most of us already suspected -- that the two career paths draw two different types of personalities. But different personalities and interests should not exclude an associate from learning how to bring in business. Quite the contrary, they should be the basis for that associate's entire approach to business development. Find what associates like and are good at, and build a sustainable approach that works for them. Everyone can contribute in different ways, and it is our job as marketing professionals to find the right buttons to push. With the right help, they will see that their natural skills can translate well into business development.

Consider the following skills necessary for business development that your associates are already really good at:

- Asking good questions designed to gather information
- Following precise checklists
- Applying a process or system to a real-life situation
- Pleasing people and knowing their audience (part of what got them to your prestigious firm was their academic performance, which in large part consists of knowing how to please an audience – professors, teachers, graders, moot court judges, etc.)
- Knowing how to find a need and fill it (the fundamental building block of all business development)
- Preparing for meetings
- Thinking on their feet
- Helping clients see consequences

These are only seven of the lingering myths surrounding business development that lurk in the hallways, elevators, and conference rooms of many firms. Dispel these myths early and your associates will accelerate their arc toward developing solid books of business.

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