

# Practical Success

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Cordell M. Parvin

## 15 Practical Tips To Attract Potential Clients

As you may know, I began my career practicing law on active duty in the United States Air Force. As a captain, my job was litigating government contract cases. That turned out to be great preparation for what was to come. Yet, when I started in private practice, I did not know what I did not know. I hope this is not what happened, but it is possible that I showed up for work my first day in a short sleeve dress shirt. That is how much I didn't know about practicing law in private practice.

Recently I met and had coaching sessions for the last time with a group of lawyers I have coached for the last 18 months. They were all associates when we started. Now, many of them have been promoted to partner and others will likely be promoted when they are eligible. In our last meeting I discussed some of the 15 lessons I learned about attracting clients:

1. Having clients who want to hire you when they need you is your only security. I learned early in my career that clients were the greatest asset I could have in private practice.



2. In addition to being a fine lawyer, business clients want you to understand their industries, businesses, and them. Potential business clients generally cannot determine whether you are a fine lawyer. They will rely on recommendations. They can very easily determine whether you understand their industries and their businesses.

3. In addition to understanding their industries, businesses, and them, clients want you to be responsive. In almost every survey I have ever seen, business clients who are not happy with their outside counsel say their lawyers are not responsive.

4. You can attract clients by writing and speaking on topics that are of most important to clients. Writing and speaking give you the chance to demonstrate your expertise and build rapport with potential clients.

5. One of the best ways to attract a potential client is to identify a problem and offer a solution before your competitors do — and even before your potential client has identified the problem. In order to accomplish this task, you must stay on top of

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what is going on in your client's world and be able to see the potential legal implications.

6. Client development is a long-term process. Most lawyers work at it without success and give up too early. It will take you time to build your profile and develop relationships. Remember to have patience, persistence, and perseverance.

7. I agree with the adage that all things else being equal, clients want to do business with lawyers they know, like, and trust. A small percentage of legal work is "bet the company" work that goes to the lawyer thought to be the best in the world. A higher percentage of legal work is commodity work that goes to whoever is willing to charge the least. An even greater percentage of legal work goes to lawyers based on their ability to develop trust and rapport with clients. So, focus your efforts on building relationships.

8. Most new clients hear about a lawyer when someone they know and trust recommends that lawyer. As often as not, the recommendation comes from someone with whom the lawyer has a "weak-tie" relationship. Work on increasing the number of weak-tie relationships who know you and appreciate your legal work.

9. When you actually have clients, the best practice is to make your current clients "raving fans" rather than spending the majority of your time trying to attract new clients. It is exciting to attract new clients, but it is more important for you to make sure your existing clients are being served well.

10. First impressions and first meetings with potential new clients really matter. Potential clients make quick decisions about the lawyers that they meet. My best advice is to look and act professional and over-prepare for the meeting. A potential client will judge you in part based on the quality of your questions and how well you listen.

11. Clients do not want to be "sold" or to have a lawyer trying "closing techniques" to win their business. You likely do not like or use traditional sales techniques. That is good because they will not likely work for you.

12. Never say anything bad to potential clients about other lawyers, especially lawyers or law firms they have used. I am always surprised that negative advertising works for political candidates. It certainly will not work well for you.

13. The more narrow a lawyer's practice, the easier it is to identify potential clients and become visible and credible to them. If you market to everyone, you market to no one. If you work on developing a niche practice, you will know where to find your potential clients and know what your potential clients care about.

14. Find your strengths as a business developer and do things that fit you. Client development will become drudgery if you are doing things you do not enjoy.

15. You have to make time for client development. I recommend that you plan each week by identifying what non-billable client development activities you want to do, estimating how long each activity will take, and putting the activity on your calendar.

Just on the potential chance I showed up for work at my first firm my first day dressed as I recall it, I should add: Never wear a short-sleeve dress shirt, wear over-the-calf socks, and wear lace-up shoes with a suit (I currently violate this one and my excuse is airport security). If you are attracting clients, what would you add to my list?