

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

Important Points on Client Development



It takes a lot more than being the best lawyer in your city to become a rainmaker. Client development demands focusing on your client's needs instead of your own and branding yourself as a lawyer who is

distinguished from—not merely better than—the competition.

Client Development is not About Marketing or Selling

Many lawyers are put off by the notion that they need to learn to be a salesman. That is understandable. I tell those lawyers that client development is not about “marketing or selling.” In fact, the harder a lawyer tries to sell a potential client, the less likely the lawyer will succeed.

Client development is all about serving and caring for your clients. When you serve and care

for your clients, you focus on them. As a result, you will listen more carefully and you will search for a way to accomplish your client's objective, not yours. You understand the business context of the work you will be doing for the client.

It Takes More Than Being a Good Lawyer

I hear many lawyers say that the best client development technique is to build a reputation for doing high quality work. I totally agree, but your competitors are also highly skilled, and they are building the same reputation as you for doing high quality work. Client development demands that you understand your client's industry and business. In addition, it demands that you understand what your client contact needs.

Clients Do Not Care About What You Do

Client development is very little about what you prefer to do or what you do best. Clients do not care about what you do. They only care about how what you do helps them resolve problems, exploit opportunities or deal with changes.

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Differentiate Yourself and Your Firm by Being Responsive and Efficient

To be successful in the 21st century, you must be more responsive and more efficient than your competitors. Business clients rarely complain about the quality of the legal work done by outside counsel, but they frequently complain about their outside counsel not being responsive or efficient.

A few years ago there was a front-page article in the Wall Street Journal about how Kohl's department store was beating the socks off of J.C. Penney's right in J.C. Penney's Dallas backyard. The writer noted that the two retailers sold the same products to the same market. Then, why was the newcomer, Kohl's doing so much better?

The writer concluded it was because it was easy for the purchaser to park at Kohl's, find what she was looking for and be finished in a short time. At Penney's, the shopper had to park in a big mall parking lot and, frequently, advertised sale items were nowhere to be found. It was a struggle to shop at Penney's. So, what can we lawyers learn from Kohl's? We need to focus on delivering our services in ways that best meet our client needs.

Identify Problems and Offer Solutions Before Your Client Knows It Has a Problem

Client development is about identifying and providing solutions to problems before the client realizes there is a problem. When I joined my old law firm, I had all my files and books on moveable book-cases in the hallway. I marched off to two days of orientation. When I returned late Friday afternoon, I met a young man named Mason. He worked for our facilities management group. He said to me: "Mr. Parvin, I know you need everything organized so you can hit the ground running on Monday. If you would like, I would be happy to come in on Saturday and help you get organized." I was blown away. Mason clearly understood the

problem and offered a solution before I mentioned the problem.

I learned the same lesson later that year. I had invited executives from my largest client and their spouses to Dallas to a Cowboys football game. On the Monday preceding the game, I got a call from Jan in our marketing department. She said: "Cordell, how would you like for me to drive with you to Texas Stadium, show you which exit to get off the freeway, show you our assigned parking place, where to enter the stadium, which elevator to get on, where to get off the elevator and how to find the firm's suite?"

Jan did not say it but she could have added: "I am willing to do this so you do not make a complete fool of yourself in front of your most important client."

Once again, I learned the importance of identifying a problem and offering a solution. Just suppose Jan would have been able to show me all she did from my computer through a video or computer generated animation. That would have saved at least an hour and would have been even more valuable.

Years ago clients could not easily find answers to their problems. Now, they can easily find an answer by doing a Google search. They might even find the answer in a blog post or article you wrote.

Where you can differentiate yourself and your law firm is by identifying the problem before the client has thought of it. You can more easily do that by keeping up with the news that impacts their industry and them.

Conclusion

So, what is the bottom line? Essentially, it is that client development is not about you or what you do. Instead, it is focused on your client, it's business and what it needs to succeed and avoid the legal mine fields it might encounter.