

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

How Can Your Friends Become Your Clients?

One of the questions I am most frequently asked is how to get a friend to be a client when she or her company already has a long-standing relationship with a lawyer or law firm. For young lawyers, more often than not, the friend is not the person who hires outside counsel. So, part of the strategy is giving the friend the tools she needs to be able to recommend you.

I know this is easier said than done, but the main thing is to focus on your relationship and what is best for your friend and her company rather than what is best for you. You will not be successful talking about yourself or your firm. Frankly your friends do not care about that. Beyond that, I believe there are only three strategies:

Become The Second Lawyer

Focus on building the relationship and being the second lawyer or firm. Lawyers and law firms have conflicts or may not handle a particular type of matter. If you can get the opportunity to “show your stuff” in one of those situations, you will have a great opportunity.

That sounds easy, but as a practical matter how do you do it? In a conversation you may ask: “Beth, when your company hires outside counsel, what does it look for?” When you get that answer, you

might say: “Share with me how that comes into play with your current firm.” After she answers, you might say: “If we were able to show you that we can [what she has identified as important], would you recommend us when your primary firm has a conflict?”

Become The Subject Matter Expert

A second strategy is to become the “go-to” leading expert in something her company needs. When I decided to focus on the highway construction industry, I had college friends

who were principals in two large, family owned highway construction businesses. In each case, my friend’s fathers were running the companies, and each father had long-standing relationships with lawyers and law firms.

The lawyers and law firms were fine lawyers, but they were not focusing exclusively on the highway construction industry. My decision to focus

on the industry presented the opportunity for me. While it took time, I eventually was able to build a relationship with the fathers, because I was narrowly focused on their industry and had become a “go-to” lawyer for highway construction legal issues. I read industry publications. I wrote articles that the fathers read. I spoke at industry meetings the fathers attended. I prepared guides for contractors on complicated matters and conducted industry workshops.



Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years of practicing law. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. You can subscribe to his Blog at <http://www.lawconsultingblog.com/>, connect with him on LinkedIn at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/cordellparvin>, join his Facebook Fan Page at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Cordell-Parvin-Lawyer-Coaching/222291473905?ref=ts>, and follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/cordellparvin>.

Add Value The Other Firm Is Not Providing

A third strategy is to find a way to add value that is beyond just the legal work. I can tell you several stories of how this has worked. One of my favorites is one that Scott, a lawyer in Houston I coached, shared with me. It is important to note that Scott is a litigator and his efforts to help his friend were in the corporate area. Here is Scott's story:

“One of my longtime friends owns an oilfield equipment and service company that primarily operates and sells in the U.S. and has operations in India and China. Based on our conversations, I knew my friend was ‘happy’ with his existing corporate attorney. But I could also tell my friend was looking for something more. Before your coaching, I would have tried to ‘sell’ him on our firm and why he should use us.

“Instead, I first set out to find out more about my friend and his company. I learned more about his background, more about his company's operations, and was especially interested in his idea to expand his company by acquiring a company in Canada. When my friend told me he was considering hiring a New York firm to help him obtain financing for the acquisition at a cost of about \$1 million, I asked him to give me 30 days to see if our

corporate lawyers could help him find financing in Houston at a lower cost.

“In the next 30 days our corporate lawyers introduced my friend to a consultant with expertise in raising funds, several bankers, an investment banker, and a private equity firm. My friend was extremely thankful and impressed. While he said that he liked his attorney, he was impressed that we went far beyond just focusing on the legal work.

“From that point on, my friend started turning to me and our firm for his legal needs. Recently, we assisted his company with acquiring companies in India and China.

“I don't think I would have been hired by this client before the coaching program because I would have tried to talk instead of listening, and I would have tried to sell our firm rather than listening for his needs and then demonstrating how we can add value beyond just doing the legal work.”

Scott's story is a good one. He found a way to add value by asking questions and listening.

There is one common theme in the three strategies. Focus on your clients, not on yourself or your firm. Learn as much about the client's industry and company as you possibly can, and then find a way to become the second lawyer, the subject matter expert, and value enhancer.

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