

Taking It To the Next Level: 10 Common Sense Tips For Attorneys

By Richard Roth

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A simple fact: a law firm is a business. While that business is the practice of law which carries with it several other obligations, responsibilities and higher ethical standards, in the end, to make it work, you must think as much as a business person as you do an attorney.

Starting and maintaining a law firm is a tough task. Presumably, we are in business not just to tread water, but to take make money. Taking our business to the next level is far from easy. Nor is there a scientific formula that works for everyone. Some attempts work and work well and others simply fail. This article assumes you are making money but attempts to take you to the next level. It focuses on making more money – bringing in more clients, multiplying revenues and, as they say in the business world, increasing the “top line.”

Having started three successful law firms throughout the years, I have been fortunate enough to better understand how to increase that top line. While reducing expense is also important, this article focuses on simple, logical and common sense tips to take that business to the next level. There is no magic involved in accelerating revenues. It involves three ingredients: hard work,

common sense and a little luck. I have set forth what I call my top ten list, most of which go into the category of common sense. Except for the first tip, there is no necessary order in which to employ them. Indeed, they should be used in your every day efforts to increase clients, revenues and your business.

1. Time Management: First and foremost, it is imperative that attorneys, on a daily basis, take time out to work *on* the business and not just *in* the business. That is, spend time marketing, networking and doing all of the things one must do to obtain more business. Simple tasks like making lists of people to contact, following up with potential clients or doing one of the many items listed below, is a start. In addition, find time before the busy day and/or after to meet clients and to stay in contact with individuals who will or may be influential in obtaining new business. Too many attorneys walk in, put their head down and crank out work during the business day. While the work must be done and the services must be performed, an hour a day working on

the business pays very large dividends in the long haul.

2. Find Connectors: In the *Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell writes about “epidemics,” which he defines as the mysterious changes in everyday life. In so doing, he identifies Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen. Connectors are defined as people who know everyone. They are, according to Gladwell, very important people. “Connectors are important for more than simply the number of people they know. Their importance is also a function of the kinds of people they know.” Gladwell is absolutely correct. There are individuals who provide a plethora of business to attorneys. They may be fellow attorneys, business connections or simply friends. Make it a point to reach out to them and stay connected with them; regularly take them out and let them know how your firm is there when needed. On that note, it is imperative that attorneys keep business cards on them at all times and have a few prepared “elevator speeches” which explains to others, especially Connectors, what the firm does on a moment’s notice.
3. Smart Networking: Networking groups have sprung up in the past six years like dandelions – they are all over the place. While the concept is ingenious – meeting for purposes of referring business –attorneys must be selective in attending and joining them. Groups that have inner groups, such as real estate brokers, title insurance individuals and mortgage brokers, are a good start for real estate attorneys. Decision makers of companies or high net worth individuals are a wonderful

source for litigators, corporate attorneys or trust and estate attorneys. It is therefore imperative that each group is analyzed to determine, at the onset, whether there is any potential business in that group. Networking in today’s age also takes the form of internet networking. Several internet networking groups have sprung up over the past three years. Look into joining Facebook, LinkedIn and Plaxo. Another derivative of networking is legal networking groups. Several bar associations have networking groups. Join and give them a year’s time. With the right attendees, that hour a month could be priceless.

4. Be Opportunistic/Follow People: Many times companies go under, decision makers leave or new decision makers are brought in. If an attorney develops close relationships with clients, those events can be positive to the firm and its business. For example, when a company closes its doors, the decision makers or even employees with whom the attorney have had a relationship go elsewhere, creating an opportunity to develop relationships with those same people at the new company. Almost like Johnnie Appleseed, following those people could result in the germination of the seeds into new business.
5. Follow the Press: Yes, follow the press. Don’t just follow the news but react and respond to the editors and reporters. I have kept this secret far too long and finally disclosed it at a recent CLE seminar sponsored by the New York City Bar Association entitled Starting Your Firm in a Recession, which was given last

month. On that panel I explained that one should look for stories in the press that relate to them and then, on occasion, write to the author to give your comments. Tell the reporter how wonderful the article was and how you can provide insight on the issue if they ever need it. People who have done so are shocked at how often reporters respond positively. The bottom line is that the press needs attorneys to comment on a case, an issue or a current event. With that contact person, the attorney can actually become a source for the press so that, over time, he or she can be the “go to” person in the field.

6. Be Maleable: One of the toughest decisions attorneys confront is whether to take a case. Yes, it is imperative to learn how to say “no” to a client or potential client. When I started my first firm my good friend’s father, who at the time was a wise and seasoned attorney, gave me one piece of advice. Joe said: “Richard, you would rather not do the work and not get paid than do the work and not get paid.” That wisdom has followed me through the years. So, say “no” to cases that are simply not going to be worth valuable time. On the other hand, when a great case walks in the door, attorneys must find a way to take that case. There are a myriad of possible retainer arrangements that can be employed to get that case: hourly, contingency, hourly cap, reduced hourly rate, reverse contingency, flat rate and more, each of which can be used enter into a relationship with the client.
7. Be The Hub: Relationships with existing clients should go beyond the

office. In addition, it is imperative that the attorney, especially for the bigger clients, is the “go to” person. The goal is not only for that client to call his or her attorney whenever he or she has an issue in the attorney’s area of expertise, but for him or her to call *whenever* there is *any* legal issue. So, it is imperative that attorneys become aligned with quality attorneys in every other practice area so that the attorney acts as a hub for that client. When someone comes asking a commercial litigator for an immigration, matrimonial, trusts and estate or corporate attorney, that litigator should immediately be able to provide the client at least two names so that the next time that client has another issue, the attorney gets that call.

8. The Interactive Website: most law firms have websites but stop with just the creation of that site. A website, however, should be an ever evolving document. First, it must concisely and precisely advertise the identity of the attorney, what he or she does, how to contact that attorney and, most importantly, should give the firm instant credibility. That is, the website should explain precisely how the firm has assisted companies or people who are just like the reader. As important is the requirement to continuously update that site. Regular maintenance is a must. Update the site with new developments, new blogs and anything and everything that will make the site interactive and current. Not coincidentally, my firm is in the process of overhauling its entire

website to accomplish each of these objectives.

9. Organize Contacts: It is imperative that all relationships be organized in writing on a computer. What does that mean? It means making sure that all contacts, both on a PDA and on computer, are alphabetically organized, updated and complete. It also means that the attorney be able to contact that database instantly. We live in a world of instant communication. Thus, emails are a must for that database. Indeed, attorneys should have a database for contacts and a second data base for email addresses which allows the attorney to expediently send out news clippings, press releases or other noteworthy information to clients, fellow attorneys or others. As is true with each website, a system of regularly updating that database should be employed by the attorney. That is, when new business cards are obtained, the attorney, within a short time period, should make sure that the information makes it to the computer contact and email list. Finally, attorneys should periodically go through their database to insure its accuracy if people move, change jobs or obtain new contact information. This database

becomes the bible of information on every existing and potential client.

10. Volunteer: Volunteering is yet another way to increase potential clientele. Not only does it serve the purpose of helping those in need, but it is also a way to get connected to various communities. For example, join one of the myriad of legal charitable organizations or even organizations that are philanthropic but do not have attorneys. It is a fantastic way to meet others similarly situated for the attorney to expand his or her horizons. In the end, each attorney wants to be the Gladwellian Connector.

It is extremely difficult to place in an article all of the different methods, techniques and/or systems one can employ to increase that top line. However, not enough can be said about focusing *on* the business. Every event, ball game, meeting, networking function or even greeting has with it a potential for new business. And once that business comes in, following up is a must. With that understanding and employing some of the tactics referred to above, the business will come. Again, while this top ten list is simply derived from common sense, the more an attorney focuses on these items, the easier it becomes to bring in that new client. In the end, hard work truly and literally does pay off.

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