

Managing Partner

WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S WORKING IN MANAGING THE SMALL TO MIDSIZED LAW FIRM

Stay on Course: How High Growth Firms Generate New Business in Any Economy

"What works when times are flat is what works when times are good," says Jeff Forchelli, managing partner of 33-attorney Forchelli, Curto, Schwartz, Mineo, Carlino & Cohen in Mineola, N.Y. While many firms feel the pressure to aggressively market themselves using everything from television ads to flashy websites, managing partners from firms maintaining healthy books of business know that what keeps clients coming through the door is providing high-quality service and putting less reliance on obvious promotions or high-tech advertising.

Managing partners from some of these successful firms explain how they are using and refining time-tested approaches to generate business even as the economy slows. Their Suggestions:

1 Never forget that law is a personal service, advises Forchelli. "You have to do it better and more efficiently than anyone else." He regularly reminds his firm's attorneys that the minute they fail to be responsive to client needs, someone else will do it. For Forchelli, this approach requires assiduously providing quick assessments of client issues and prompt response to client questions, preferably the same day.

2 Reputation is the best advertising. Although blitzing the market with advertisements can bring people in the door, Forchelli says that having a reputation for good lawyering is more effective. Even in heavily populated areas such as suburban New York City where he practices, Forchelli finds that work spreads as to who delivers and who doesn't. "Most clients come as referrals from other clients," he notes. So, having a stellar reputation for efficient, effective service can be better than buying ads.

3 Work to gain national visibility. According to attorney Phil Andrews, managing partner at Baltimore's 23-attorney Kramon & Graham specializing in civil litigation and white collar criminal defense, all of the firm's attorneys work hard and avoid overly staffing up on cases. This approach has resulted in several of the firm's partners developing national reputations, including being named to the list of "Best Lawyers in America." Andrews points out that since a lot of the firm's business comes from lawyer referrals, the firm's nationwide notoriety for quality legal services is a substantial generator of new business.

Tip: Andrews says that his partner, Lee Ogburn developed a high-profile national reputation by speaking at seminars, writing articles and working on events sponsored by the ABA that put him in contact with lawyers from around the country.

4 Newsletters and e-mails generate better responses than websites. While Andrews believes it imperative for every firm to have a website identifying the firm's practice areas, introducing the attorneys and highlighting any recent or noteworthy accomplishments, he can't think of anyone who retained his firm because of the website. Keeping regular contact with clients using newsletters and e-mails which provide valuable information on changes and developments in relevant areas of the law is a more effective means for maintaining the one-to-one contact that spawns new work and referrals, Andrews believes.

Tip: Roger Barton, managing partner of the 10-attorney cor-

porate firm, **Barton Barton & Plotkin** in New York City, generates two to three page newsletters in-house on relevant news stories or when the firm has a case that's been reported. In addition to sending it to existing clients, he also mails copies to former clients and personal contacts made over the years such as accountants, bankers, and the other lawyers, who are great referral sources.

5 Don't underestimate the value of networking. Networking among the firm's existing client base, especially attending trade association events, has proven a "terrific" source of new business, says Barton. He finds that keeping a presence at such gatherings generates work from current clients as well as earning the firm referrals. Barton emphasizes that it's also essential to cultivate relationships with executives in client companies since they frequently become the source of new work. "Sometimes a high-level executive goes on to a new company and brings us in because of our prior relationship," he adds, noting that trade association networking has become the firm's largest source of new business.

Tip: If possible, become a speaker at trade group events. Recently, Barton's firm spoke at a conference sponsored by the NYC Economic Development Corporation for 27 Italian companies looking to do business in the U.S. "Immediately after we spoke, we got pulled over to draft a joint venture distribution agreement," Barton explains.

6 Community involvement can lead to business. Pro bono work and community service has been the second biggest new client generator for Barton's firm. "Sitting on the board of directors for groups related to our core business a couple of times a year is an excellent opportunity to make contacts," he advises. Andrews agrees that serving on the boards of various charities, bar groups and task forces has brought business to his firm, even where they were competing against larger firms for clients.

Tip: Andrews says that he has won many big corporate clients because of the contacts made doing volunteer work with charitable organizations.

HOW TO GENERATE BUSINESS FROM EXISTING CLIENTS

Roger Barton, managing partner of New York City firm, Barton Barton & Plotkin finds his existing client database is the best place to get new business. His approach:

- Become familiar with your clients' business and be proactive. Figure-out what their business objectives are so that you can pick-out legal issues and make suggestions.
- Don't let the client limit the assignment. Ask questions that can expose further matters the client needs to address.
- Don't be shy about asking clients who they know within their industry. "Ask them, 'would you feel comfortable introducing us to them,'" says Barton.
- Don't put on formal seminars for clients. Instead, meet with clients at their offices regularly - once a month if possible - and discuss their business. "It almost always gets us more work."

**BARTON
BARTON
&
PLOTKIN
LLP**

ATTORNEYS AT LAW
420 LEXINGTON AVENUE
NEW YORK NY 10170
212.687.6262
FAX 212.697.3043
BARTONESQ.COM

Reprinted from *Managing Partner*, Volume 3 Number 8, August, 2001