

Law Office & Trust Account Management

Business Development Coaching: Its Time Has Come. Are You Ready?

By Kimberly Alford Rice

Over the past few years, firms have begun to recognize the importance and value of investing in their talent, and teaching lawyers to learn how to effectively attract and win new clients. The skill set required for this career-long exercise is not taught in most law schools or law firms. What follows is a case for lawyers to consider professional coaching when weighing their career goals and their current skill set for developing their own client base.

If you are swimming in profitable clients and lucrative work with no end in sight, this article is not for you. If new clients flock to you wherever you go, no need to read any further. However, if this does not describe you, read on.

With reports pouring out almost daily on how the economy continues to hammer the legal services sector, lawyers are scratching their heads and wondering

Rice is a principal of KLA Marketing Associates, a business development advisory firm focusing on legal services.

what else they can do to build and expand their book of business.

They often think that by delivering a good work product to their clients, and entertaining them occasionally, the work will continue to flow their way. The reality is, however, that clients' legal budgets have been slashed, there is a diminished demand for legal services in some areas, and lawyers are not always effective in expanding work with existing clients and attracting new work.

Given these tough truisms, training and coaching in professional business development skills can be a viable solution. Educating and supporting attorneys in bringing cohesion to their business development efforts will encourage more productive behaviors that result in expanded relationships with existing clients, and attracting new clients. Often, effective coaching can be the "boots on the ground" of growing a practice.

According to David Freeman, CEO of the David Freeman Consulting Group, and Terri Mottershead, principal at Mottershead Consulting, "More firms are realizing that training requires ongoing

follow-up to yield desired results. Personal coaching and accountability systems can provide the kind of implementation support needed to turn new skills into new habits and behaviors. Firms are also recognizing the need to focus their limited resources on top performers who can make the biggest impacts."

What Is Coaching, Anyway?

Many have heard the buzz about partnering with a professional coach. But understanding is still limited regarding the collaborative nature of working with a coach, and how it can bring greater strategic focus to a lawyer's practice. The professional coach is focused solely on helping her lawyer-clients assess their practice, evaluate client expansion and new business and cross-selling opportunities, and objectively direct them to develop a targeted plan on how to realize their business goals. This does not happen overnight, but rather through taking steady, measured steps and developing a marketing mindset by becoming sensitized to business opportunities. It is often in those "measured steps" (a.k.a. execution) that most plans falter. A professional coach helps her clients to follow through on stated action steps.

Rainmaking lawyers are often too busy, or their personalities too formidable, to actually ask for help or support. Yet, they could grow their book substantially if they took the time to evaluate

succinctly where existing opportunities lie. A coach can help with that.

Robin Nolan, director of marketing at Philadelphia-based Weber Gallagher Simpson Stapleton Fires & Newby, works one-on-one with her lawyers, some on a standing monthly basis, to help them with practice development goals. "We find that our attorneys benefit from some guidance on the steps to take to leverage their business relationships and opportunities. I provide counsel on developing and enhancing those business relationships."

Likewise, a professional coach works hard to understand a lawyer's goals and target clients. She guides the attorney to develop concrete practice goals, and helps her to be more strategic in her approach and business development efforts. A coach can offer support and motivation to help attain targeted goals, help instill discipline to an otherwise hectic schedule, and introduce a level of accountability where there is little.

A successful coaching program can help:

- Clarify client development goals;
- Create goal-focused action plans;
- Develop leadership and business development skills;
- Promote relationship-focused activities; and
- Build stronger communication, networking and presentation skills.

What Should You Expect?

For those who have ever engaged the services of a personal trainer, you understand the nature of the collaborative relationship. You know there is an adjustment period of getting to know one another and how the trainer will develop a program that works best for you. You understand that there are new skills to learn and practice, and you will always

enjoy the personal attention and focus you receive from your coach. The coach and client become partners in achieving the client's success.

We all need some extra help from time to time, particularly in such a hard-charging, fiercely competitive environment. Working with a coach can help alleviate some of the uncertainty and stress of wondering whether you are plowing forward in a smart and savvy way in your practice. After becoming more educated and sensitized to constructive business development behaviors and marketing tactics, you will reap the rewards of integrating these new behaviors into your daily practice and they will become second nature. You will become more confident in your efforts and grow to trust your instincts in existing and new client opportunities.

According to Steve Carrington, Saul Ewing's director of marketing, "Our business development training is provided by those who have deep knowledge of the practice groups and everything that is involved. This way, a training discussion can take place with full understanding of our clients, other practices and attorneys and not in a vacuum."

Are You a Good Coaching Candidate?

Whether you are a solo practitioner or the head of a large firm, engaging the services of a business development coach can serve your purposes of developing and growing your client base. But, are you ready?

You may benefit from working with a business development coach when you:

- Think of your practice as your own business;
- Recognize your practice could be better if you had a focused plan and actually executed it;
- Have a plan but have not achieved

your desired results;

- Are tired of wasting time on random acts of marketing with little or no result;
- Want to take your practice or your firm to a higher level; and
- Are willing and committed to do whatever it takes to succeed.

For those attorneys who recognize that despite the genuine efforts they are expending (or that marketing departments are making on their behalf), their expectations are not being met, a professional coach can be a useful investment.

What Makes a Successful Student?

All of my coaching clients are highly skilled lawyers, successful in their own right within their firm and community, and are overachievers. They recognize the things at which they excel, and the areas where they could benefit from outside expertise. In short, they are "teachable." These are the folks who most greatly benefit from a coach. They want to exploit every available tool to help them succeed.

Some of my clients have enjoyed a coaching relationship since they first began their legal career years ago. Over time, we have assessed their changing needs at various stages of their practice, and adapted an appropriate plan to continue to address their ongoing efforts and approaches.

One client recently stated, "Practical skills are not taught in law school and rarely within a firm, so we are left to our own devices to figure out how to develop new clients. I'm grateful I found a coach early on to enlighten me on the professional way to build client relationships and bring in new business."

Shouldn't you? ■