



Yes, Your Law Firm Is a Business

Business Development for Lawyers

BY DOUG HASTINGS

Lawyers are under increasing pressure to generate revenues, grow their client relationships, and develop new clients and referral sources. But, lawyers realistically observe, “I was never taught how to grow my legal *business* in law school.” They scramble to try to figure it out.

Many lawyers aren’t sure what to do—even when they *want* to grow their business. They stress and agonize over the issue. Random acts of marketing are sporadic and undertaken with various levels of confidence. However, “winging it” has real consequences. It raises stress, wastes time, and downgrades work/life balance. There’s a disconnect between the growth mandate and the tools to help lawyers develop business as part of their practice of law.

Maybe it’s a relief to hear that only 3% of professional services firms, including law firms, train for business development. The upside to this is that with a reasonable effort, you can, on your own, bridge that gap between desire to grow, knowledge of what to do, and actions to

develop. No matter your career stage, you can and will get better at the business side of law.

Yes, your firm or practice is a business. If your clients are businesses, think of it this way: they are most likely implementing marketing plans, strategic plans, client growth projects, and carefully crafted outreach while constantly improving in these mission-critical areas. Their market is also competitive and more customer-driven than ever.

Additionally, a law practice is one of the few professions where you control your financial destiny. Whether you’re an associate, a partner, a medium/large firm lawyer, or a solo/small firm practitioner, your actions and skills can directly influence your bank account. New attorneys should start early with this realization and with appropriate growth actions.

Law Firm Business Development Basics

To help you begin your business development journey, this article offers five fundamentals

and strategies you can learn and use to grow your firm or practice and gain a competitive advantage:

- knowing your *Why* (i.e., your motivation to achieve results);
- adopting a positive attitude about business development;
- understanding that business development is a learned set of skills;
- forming good business development habits; and
- taking small, *consistent*, deliberate actions.

The first three strategies deal with you, your motivation, and your attitude toward growth. In other words, they focus on building a motivational, realistic foundation. Once that foundation is in place, you can then begin taking concrete steps to increase your clients, revenues, and referrals.

Knowing Your “Why”

The most fundamental question to ask yourself is *Why*? Why do you want to grow your firm or practice? This may require a shift in mindset. It must become something you truly *want* to do instead of something you’re *supposed* to do.

The number one *Why* I hear from most lawyers is that they want to make more money. And that’s perfectly fine. You’ve spent an extraordinary amount of time and money on your career, so why not maximize the return on your personal investment? Others share that they want to make partner or work fewer hours. Find, understand, and embrace your business development *Why*. Once you do, you’ll inspire yourself to achieve it.

Adopting a Positive Attitude

An important component of business development is attitude. You must decide for yourself that you want to improve your business development skills. Also acknowledge that it will take time to learn and hone your skills. You might tell yourself, “I’m okay with being just okay at the beginning.”

Lawyers have the mindset of always having to be correct. It comes with the profession. When faced with the imperative to improve their business development, they balk, wondering, “Would I rather do something I’m really good

at—the practice of law—or something I’m not so good at—business development?”

Busy lawyers lament, “I don’t have time to do this.” Yes, you’re busy and I get it. But consider reviewing some low-level activities and reprioritizing that time to high-level business growth actions. Time spent on your business growth is not “in addition to” but more “instead of.”

You need to get out of the worry and stress feedback loop that seriously hampers most

take a business development course or read a book or build the outreach calendar suggested later in the article.

Forming Good Habits

Would you like to know the number one good habit—the one that sits upstream from all the others? It’s the weekly 15-minute session mentioned earlier. This is your project management “meeting with yourself” to keep you on track

EPA/OSHA regulations, and so forth. Apply this (learned) skill to your own business growth.

Consider implementing these business development habits:

- Create your own one-year business development calendar.
- Make a point to return calls and emails within one day.
- Develop and use a way to capture useful resources (articles, websites, posts, news items, etc.) that become part of your client/referral outreach.
- Calendar 15 minutes each week for devoted growth actions.
- In your weekly session, *start* with a small task. (The time will fly!)
- Overcome procrastination by making business development fun.
- Finally, reward yourself when you have small wins, and embrace these good habits to ensure success.

What does that look like? Close your office door. Put your phone on silent. Gather your business development notes. Scan these for goals and actions you know will build your success. Then dedicate yourself to *three small actions for the week* and write them down. Keep a binder, spreadsheet, or document. But don’t make it so cumbersome that it causes an impediment. Our minds are quick to say “this is too hard. Never mind.”

How long will this review take? Five minutes at most. Then, do the three actions without delay. That will take the next 10 minutes.

If you do this weekly, you will do more in the next 90 days than you’ve done in the past year! This is you taking charge of your success, your revenues, your confidence, and your ambition.

Going Small for Success

Business development is self-perpetuating as you build momentum and experience small wins. Small, consistent, deliberate actions move you forward and build your business development skills.

In fact, you may be surprised to learn that you’re currently performing one action right now by reading this article. Excellent! Each small step, each improvement, builds confidence and propels you forward.

INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT WHAT IS YOUR WHY?



attorneys. Later in this article, I suggest a short 15-minute a week session to keep your growth activities on track. While others may fret, you smile, knowing once a week you spend a small amount of time building your legal practice.

Understanding That Business Development Is Learned

Lawyers may have never been exposed to business development basics. (See the 3% statistic above.) But the actions for successful business development are learnable skills. That’s good news. Think of playing the piano, driving a car, defending a medical expert depo, brushing your teeth, writing an appellate brief, or snowboarding. These are all tasks that require skills that build over time. They can be learned with small, intentional, deliberate practice.

Whew—what a relief! Why? Because as a lawyer, you are exceptional at learning and acquiring skills. You do it all the time in your work. You were *made* for business development—and vice versa. You’re investing in yourself as you

THE SELF-PERPETUATING CONTROL OF YOUR OWN FINANCIAL DESTINY



and keep your momentum. You are already an excellent project manager. You can handle all the complexities and deadlines inherent in designating witnesses, shepherding M&A deals to closing, complying with complicated

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
C1 R1	C2 R2	C3 R3	C1 R1	C2 R2	C3 R3	C1 R1	C2 R2	C3 R3	C1 R1	C2 R2	C3 R3

Remind yourself as you *grow your skills!*



You control your *financial destiny*



Good business development is *learned*



As with any skill, there are *steps* in learning and practicing



Develop *good habits* early



Small investments of your time on a regular basis (yes, an investment!)

I began with basics that are more reflective and internal. Ones that get you pointed in the right direction, with a new and improved business growth attitude. Let me share guidance on one of the areas you can develop now to grow your legal business.

Again, I hesitate to say “do this and this” for success. Most of us don’t do well with a set of mandates without first having the correct attitude and a solid *Why* to motivate us.

Here’s the secret sauce for most lawyers and firms: 85% of your *new matters* come from existing clients. Over 75% of your *new clients* come through people you already know. This is powerful. Why? Because the data helps you focus your business development efforts on the most likely areas for tangible success.

To be most effective, spend 75% of the time you devote to growth on your existing clients and existing referral sources. Curating, building, and networking with these groups should be your number one business development priority.

What does networking mean in this context? Not what you might normally associate with networking. You should focus on regular outreach and interaction with your clients and referral sources. You want to stay top of mind with them. You want them thinking, “My attorney is great at providing useful information to me on a consistent basis.” Clients and referral sources

should be able to share, “I know an attorney in this area. She sends me regular updates and just spoke to our association.”

Let’s make this manageable for the next 12 months. Focus on three existing clients and three referral sources that have the most potential to move your legal practice forward. The graphic above shows a simple way to map out quarterly outreach with this targeted group. Client 1 and referral contact 1 get quarterly outreach in January, April, July, and October. Client 2 and referral contact 2 in February, May, August, and November. And so on.

When I map this out with lawyers, they get excited. “I can reach out four times a year to a good client. When you mentioned outreach, I thought it was some spammy, constant barrage.” Nope. It’s an intentional plan to be consistent and helpful while adding value to the relationship.

Outreach suggestions include: a twice yearly (no charge) phone call, forwarding a relevant article, making a business introduction, inviting them to a trade/industry group luncheon, a lunch or coffee invitation, commenting on a trade or industry development that affects them, a handwritten note sent to them on something not business related (sports, children, school, vacation spot), or commenting on a LinkedIn post.

Above: This graphic shows a simple way to map out quarterly outreach with three existing clients and three referral sources.

Imagine the impact on this client relationship when you proactively reach out once a quarter with relevant, value-added, meaningful communication.

Takeaways

Typically, there are no business classes in law school. After all, it’s called law school, not business school. However, with some fundamentals and guidance you can own your financial destiny and experience growth while decreasing your business development stress.

Great business development can be straightforward. It’s expected from clients (yes, it’s true—they want regular, meaningful outreach). It creates a win/win when it’s client centric. Focus your limited available time on the most likely areas of growth and take control of your financial destiny. Honestly, knowing how to improve your business with consistent, regular activity moves you miles ahead in the very competitive legal industry no matter the size of your firm.

I know from experience that busy lawyers must first *decide* to grow their practice as a business and prioritize accordingly. Not everyone is there yet, but you can be. Welcome to the 3% of lawyers who train for business development success. **CL**



Doug Hastings is a lawyer who coaches and trains lawyers and law firms on successful business development at Lawyer to Lawyer Business Development Coaching (www.lawyerbizdev.com)—doug@douglashastings.com.

Coordinating Editor: Jeffery Weeden, jlweeden@weedenlaw.com