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"If You Build It, They Will Come—Growing Your Practice in Good Times and Bad"

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Boom or bust, there's one constant question I hear from young lawyers: What's the best way to develop business? And the answer is always the same: Whatever works best for you.

I know, that's like your mom telling you, "Honey, just be yourself and the boys (or girls) will notice." But just as mom's advice turned out to be right, so is mine. If you adopt a contrived or painful business development program, it will be short-lived and unsuccessful. If, on the other hand, you play on your strengths and do what comes naturally, you probably will come out a winner.

Most people feel overwhelmed at the notion of business development, as if they have to be everywhere and know everything to get enough business to survive. Not true. It is true, though, that the more you put into it, the more you get out.

Here's another truth: The longer you do this job, the better you will get, the more people you will know or know you, and the more business you will get - almost by osmosis.

All of these truths are based on one important assumption: that you know your stuff. If your legal skills are lacking, if you don't provide excellent legal work, you can do all the networking in the world and do it for 30 years and still not get much business. So if you're not a good lawyer, work on that part first. Then you can worry about becoming a rainmaker.

OK, now that we have that out of the way...

At the end of the day, being a good lawyer is what matters to my clients. And that's why they come back. And that's why they refer me business. It's not because I play golf with them (which I don't). It's not because I uttered the right magic sales words during our meetings (which I don't think I did, at least not knowingly). And it's not because I followed some system laid out for me by some consultant.

Nevertheless, here's some thoughts on rainmaking:

From an employment standpoint, your job isn't as important as your career. Never take shortcuts—or shortchange a client—for a buck. Or even many bucks. Jobs come and go, as do economic booms and busts. But your body of work, your skills, your ethic and, most importantly, your reputation, will follow you wherever you go. Never do anything to undercut them.

Client relationships are like any other relationship; they require communication. But there is some wisdom to working with people you like. After all, you're there to take care of their interests, to be their partner, in many aspects. If you don't like each other enough to break bread, the relationship isn't going to go far.

Of course, there is the occasional, exceptional technician who can get away with being a jerk to his clients because he is far and away the best widget lawyer out there. But unless you've written the book on your body of law, and you have absolutely no competition for business, treat your clients like real people whom you (should) actually care about. You can't fake this part of the job. If you don't like your clients, and you don't care about their well-being, or if you don't know your area of the

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law, or you just plain don't like being a lawyer, please do us all a favor and find another way to make a living. Clients come to us for help, and it may sometimes be help that falls outside the scope of our law degree. If that's the case, don't be like those annoying employees at the grocery store who say they can't help you find out whether there's any more celery because they don't work in produce. Find them help. Hold their hands. Confirm their decision to consider you their counselor.

No Fairy Dust

Know something about your client's industry. You don't have to know everything about the construction industry, just enough to sound like you know something about his or her world. Even if it's not their industry, per se, but a personal like or dislike, knowing something about it can go a long way. I have a client, for example, who likes the Memphis Grizzlies. Nobody likes the Grizzlies except this guy. Well, this guy and my son. So I was able to talk about the Grizzlies with him.

Does that mean he's going to send his next multimillion-dollar deal to me? Probably not. But did it help bond us a bit? Of course it did. Leave the office now and then. Become involved in the local bar, do some pro bono work, write an article for the bar journal, give a speech here and there. You'd be amazed at how little you have to do before you obtain what you call "perceived ubiquity." If somebody sees your name twice, you have achieved "I see this guy everywhere" status with that person.

While you may not be able to make a flow chart tracking the article directly to the new client, I'm surprised how often colleagues and clients remark that they've heard me speak or read a column of mine, or they simply just know of me, but can't recall why or where. Again, it didn't make or break the relationship. But it keeps me in their field of vision.

So, to summarize, no, there is no magic fairy dust or fool-proof system to develop business. On the other hand, it's not rocket science. But you do have to make the commitment to do it and, most importantly, follow through on that commitment. The business will eventually follow.