

## ***A Young Lawyer's Guide to Client Development Building a Law Practice in a Small Firm***

Ann-Marie Ahern, Esq.  
The Simon Law Firm, LLP  
1300 East Ninth Street, Ste. 1717  
Cleveland, Ohio 44114  
216-575-1002

\*\*\*Used with the Author's Permission

### **I. Overview**

Professionalism is an integral part of building a small practice. Your reputation among clients and the community may be the single most important factor in building a successful practice. In a small firm, "client development" differs in some material respects from a large firm. If you represent plaintiffs, repeat business from the same client is unlikely and even undesirable. In most every small firm, it is not economically feasible to develop client relationships through wining, dining, or entertaining. Instead, small firm practitioners should capitalize on "client development" opportunities presented in the ordinary course of their practices. These opportunities present themselves most frequently in the form of client interaction, community involvement, and networking within the legal community.

**II. Client Interaction-** Building a referral base is essential to any small practice. The best way to build a referral base is by word of mouth through satisfied clients.

#### **A. Interacting with Potential New Clients**

1. For many of the people visiting your office, this may be the first time that they've ever hired a lawyer. Do not use "high pressure" tactics to sign the client. With the public perception of lawyers at an all-time low, this technique is likely to backfire.
2. Be sure to explain the entire lawsuit process from start to finish.
  - a. Explain how a complaint is filed and served.
  - b. Define "discovery" and explain the various discovery techniques that are permitted and how they will be utilized.
  - c. Explain that our actions are governed by the Rules of Civil Procedure and other court rules to debunk any misconceptions that the client may have from watching courtroom drama television.

3. Give clients a realistic expectation of the time commitment, monetary commitment, and range of potential results that will be involved in pursuing legal action.
4. If you decline representation, assist potential new clients in finding appropriate counsel. Even if you can not ultimately take on representation of the potential new client, if treated with dignity and respect, that "rejected" client will remember your assistance and may be the source of your next big case.

**B. Reasonable Accessibility to Clients**

1. Always return phone calls.
2. Make sure clients feel that they can always get in touch with you. Provide clients with multiple methods to reach you.
3. Explain to clients the demands on your time. Explain that there will be times when it will not be possible to return a phone message immediately.
4. Make sure clients are introduced to your clerical staff so that they can always reach a person in your office in the event of an emergency.

**C. There is real value of explaining the concept of "wait your turn" to clients. Some people say that every client should be made to feel like they are your only client. But we all have multiple clients and multiple demands on our time associated with representing a number of clients. Managing client expectations is critical.**

1. In a small firm, it is unlikely that every matter that you are handling has your complete attention and focus simultaneously. Instead, you dedicate blocks of time to matters as deadlines approach and as other matters are resolved.
2. Clients need to understand that their matter is not the only matter pending in your office. Explain from the *onset of the case* that there will be lulls in activity on their case, but that there will also be periods of intensity where their matter will be the sole focus of your attention. Clients hope and expect that when the activity on their case intensifies, they will have your full attention. Conversely, when you are absorbed in another matter, they will understand that they will get the same type and level of attention when their time comes.

**D. Your client should feel like you're the best lawyer in the world**

1. Always make your client aware of what you've done to advocate on his or her behalf. Send them copies of major briefs filed. Invite them to watch you argue at a hearing or before the Court of Appeals. Direct your client to the court's on-line docket so that they can see activity in the case.
2. Dress the part/ act the part.
  - a. Always look professional in your dress. Make sure that your staff does the same.
  - b. Treat every client as if they are your biggest client. Chances are, the legal matter in which they are involved is a significant event in your client's life and should be treated as such by you.
3. Always prepare your client. Make sure that your client knows what to expect at every pretrial, every deposition, and at every juncture of the process. Thoroughly explain the purpose, physical location and procedure at every step of the litigation process. Eliminating fear of the unknown will engender your client's confidence in you.

III. Community Involvement- the importance of making a name for yourself and your firm in the community cannot be understated. Chances are, you will not have a sophisticated marketing department to get your name out. You must be your own promoter and you must not be shy about letting people know about the services that you offer.

- A. Get involved in charities; serve on committees and boards.
- B. Become involved in groups that complement your practice area and groups that are most likely to come into contact with people who may need your services.
- C. Tell people about what you do. Instead of saying "I'm a lawyer" when you meet new people, say "I'm a lawyer that represents people in divorces, helps people write wills or represents people accused of crimes or represents people in employment disputes, etc. As the general practitioner seems to be disappearing, people are grateful for the contact.

IV. Networking in the Legal Community

- A. Make the most of your bar association memberships. Make sure that you are involved in a variety of bar associations, including state, local, practice area associations. For instance, while you may get relevant information about your practice area from a specialized bar or section of a bar association, membership in organizations with members whose practices are diverse from your own practice will create more networking opportunities and more referral sources.

- B. Whenever possible, take on a visible role in those organizations. If you demonstrate your competence as a member of an organization to your colleagues, you are expanding your referral base.
- C. Never turn down an invitation to speak (provided it is on a topic that you know). Any ability to demonstrate competence in your practice area should be seized upon.
- D. Develop and update your Curriculum Vitae regularly.