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Building a Reputation for Yourself as an Industry Expert

By Stephen E. Seckler

Several times per month, I receive phone calls from recent law school graduates who are looking for entry-level jobs. The typical conversation starts something like this:



BCG: Hi. This is Steve Seckler at BCG Attorney Search.

Caller: Hi. This is Jim Davis. I'm looking for a legal job, and I'm wondering if you can help me.

BCG: Sure, Jim. Can you tell me something about yourself?

Caller: Yes. I graduated this past spring from Second-Tier Law School, and I'm looking for a

position as an associate.

BCG: Can you tell me a little more about what you are looking for?

Caller: Well, I'm interested in litigation, but I'm also open to doing corporate, real estate, or estate planning work."

At this point, I will start asking more probing questions about the caller's interests and about the type of firm he or she would like to work at, but in truth, these are frequently very short phone calls. For starters, BCG Attorney Search doesn't really work with recent law school graduates. In general, the law firms who pay our fees are only interested in seeing the resumes of lateral candidates with major-law-firm experience.

But there is an even more compelling reason that these conversations are generally short. I am happy to dispense career advice, and when asked, I actually spend a fair amount of time informally coaching lawyers I will never place. The problem with phone calls like the one I described above is that I don't know how to help someone find "any" job.

If a person can articulate with greater specificity what he or she wants or what he or she has to offer, then I am much more likely to find a way to help that individual. I am also much more likely to remember that person in the future.

In Marketing, Less is More.

I completely understand why recent graduates try to cast

wide nets. If you are unemployed and eager to find a job, it seems very logical to avoid being overly selective. The truth, however, is that being specific is much more effective. This is true whether you are speaking with prospective employers or with individuals who may be in positions to make you aware of job openings.

The same is true once you are a practicing lawyer and trying to build your practice. Prospective buyers of legal services are much more likely to remember you if you describe your expertise specifically rather than generally.

Since it is unlikely that someone will need your legal services the first time you meet him or her, it is important to remain "memorable." Similarly, while most professionals you speak to may not be aware of job opportunities when you first contact them, over time, they will be more likely to learn of something that might be a good fit for you.

It comes down to the basic proposition that in marketing, "less is more." This is true if you are looking for a job. It is equally true if you are an experienced lawyer trying to generate new work.

Positioning is Key.

The best way to make yourself memorable is to position yourself. That is what marketing is all about. If you can find a way to differentiate yourself from everyone else looking for a job or every other lawyer seeking to generate legal work, then your prospects will be much more likely to remember you when they have needs (or when they hear of others who have needs).

How you market yourself should not be confused with how you decide whether to pursue a particular job or how you decide whether to take on a piece of legal work. They are related concepts, but they are not the same. The work you choose to do as a lawyer may very well be much more extensive than the services you market.



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For example, the job you choose to accept may not be the litigation job you said you were looking for but, instead, a real estate position with a great firm that involves some land use litigation. This may not be the job you were marketing yourself for, but it may turn out to be a great opportunity to do great work with great people, etc.

Similarly, you may choose to position yourself as an estate planner who works with recently married couples and younger entrepreneurs. But that does not mean you will not perform any other legal services or do estate planning work for clients in other categories. Perhaps you will also handle simple divorces and even take on small collection matters.

When you are asked at a cocktail party what you do, you will present yourself as an estate planner. However, if you learn in the course of talking to an individual that he or she has other legal needs that you can handle, then by all means, do not hesitate to let that individual know that you may be able to help (either because you have the time and need the income or because you want to build the relationship in hopes of getting other work down the road).

Positioning yourself is key for a few reasons. First, articulating with specificity what it is you are looking for is a way of setting a goal for yourself. Stating that you do X rather than Y is a way of committing to a particular area of expertise. There is a growing body of evidence to support the theory that writing down your goals is a highly effective way to attain them.

Second, if you take the time to create a category for yourself, you will make it much easier for your prospects and referral sources to find a good place to “file” you away for another day.

We are Better Equipped to Remember Information That is Properly Filed.

The human brain is an incredible creation. With our highly evolved brains, we are capable of remembering millions of pieces of information. As the world becomes more and more complex, this capacity becomes increasingly important.

Being able to quickly retrieve information is equally important. We may be able to “remember” a lot of things, but if we do not have the ability to access information when we need it, our vast memory reserves are not nearly as useful to us.

The key to information retrieval is finding good ways to “file” information in our memories so that it can stand apart from all of the other information in our brains.

In order to help others “retrieve” information about our professional capabilities at appropriate times (i.e., when they might need our services), it is therefore important to come up with good filing systems that others can use to file information about us.

If you tell someone that you are a lawyer but provide no other details about yourself, you are making the task of remembering who you are difficult. That individual may know dozens of lawyers.

However, if you tell someone that you are a business lawyer who provides legal advice to startup technology companies and that, in particular, you work with companies looking for venture capital funding, if that person works for such a company, he or she is much more likely to remember who you are and what you do.

Similarly, if that individual has a lot of business contacts and comes across a startup company that is, in fact, looking for venture capital financing, he or she will be much more likely to make the connection between you and the company.

How to Become an Industry Expert

There are numerous ways of communicating to the world that you are an expert on a subject. Telling everyone you know is a good place to start. Professional writing is also an excellent way to send the message that you are knowledgeable about an area of the law. I frequently write about career and marketing issues for Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly because I want lawyers in Massachusetts to think of me when they have career issues.

Public speaking is another highly effective means for positioning yourself as an expert. If you speak at CLE programs or bar association meetings, you present yourself to other lawyers as knowledgeable about a subject. If you speak on industry panels or at community forums, you have opportunities to reach actual buyers of legal services.

The Internet has created many new ways to be published. Blogs and podcasts are both particularly hot right now. I created a blog at www.counseltocounsel.com in order to reach



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a younger and/or more technologically savvy segment of the bar (i.e., a group that is less inclined toward reading more conventional legal publications). By posting regularly to my blog, I differentiate myself from other recruiters who do not take the time to write about important career trends in the law.

Getting active on the committee of a trade association is another way to establish yourself as an industry expert. Of course, representing a lot of clients in a particular industry is probably the most effective way to establish your expertise.

Conclusions

There are many benefits of becoming specialized as a lawyer. Adopting a special area of interest will help you to

find an entry-level job or make a lateral move. Developing a reputation as an industry expert will be enormously beneficial to you as you build your own law practice.

However, make sure you choose an area you enjoy. If you want to build a successful career, you have a long road ahead of you. If you choose something you like doing, you will be much more motivated to invest the time it takes to become a successful professional.

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