

Starting Young Pays Big Dividends: Increasing Business Development for Women Attorney Associates

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Women associates who learn business development skills can become significant business generators as they hone their legal skills. Based on a study of 426 women attorneys, we find that 53% of survey participants report that one of the biggest obstacles for generating new business is their lack business development knowledge and skills. Their law firms failed to provide business development training for associates and for many partners.

The LSSO “women attorney business development study” conducted has 426 women lawyer participants. This sample includes mostly (85%) full time attorneys working in firms ranging in size from very small to large global/national. Most (74%) are employed in global and/or national/regional firms. Slightly more respondents (53%) are equity and non-equity partners. The study includes senior and junior associates (47%). A broad range of practice areas is represented. Over half (55%) of the sample were married women who have children.

Learning From Women Partners

Women with many years of legal experience are the big producers. There is a positive correlation between years of legal experience and high origination. These women also do specific “high yield” business development activities. :

Having many years of legal experience is correlated with the following specific business development activities:

- Business development planning

- Spending many hours each month pursuing business development
- Understanding many aspects of their clients' business
- Holding leadership positions in community organizations
- Holding leadership positions within the firm
- Requesting referrals for clients and referral sources
- Asking referral sources for introductions to other companies
- Asking contacts for introductions to prospects
- Cross selling
- Participating on pitch teams

Relationship Selling Skills

Although the survey revealed that law firms have a lot of We found that many of women's business activities are relationship based. The study shows 67% of new business is generated from existing clients. The next highest source of new business is from referral sources. Many women gain access to new business opportunities by asking clients, colleagues, friends and others referral sources for introductions to people who may need their expertise. They also have relationships with other firm attorneys and participate in cross-selling initiatives and team selling groups, which by their nature are based on forming strong and positive relationships with colleagues, and trusted relationships with existing clients.

Given that many women are often natural relationship builders, training and coaching using these skills can be integrated naturally. There are specific steps, activities, and perceptions that need to be offered, fostered, and developed. As with other skills, such as athletic excellence or musical talents, improvements at the beginning of the process provide more years of doing small things right, more years for effective habits to be developed, and less need to unlearn bad habits.

Law firms can deliberately teach younger associates these and other business development activities so they can apply their efforts to those which yield the best results.

More Business

With 85% of law firm governance being male, why should law firms care about women's business development skills? Because women generally comprise at least half of the associates in law firms today, and they are motivated to excel.

While this is nominally a women's issue, successful business development is an issue of business success and competitive advantage for law firms.

While law school graduating classes average over 50% women (NAWL 2006 study of the 200 largest national firms), and women represent on average 45% of associates, they represent only 16% of equity partners. Because business development success is one of the factors in become an equity partner and a leader, supporting women's business development efforts is even more important.

The Obstacles

Our findings indicate that 47% of women report having few mentors, gender barriers that are allowed to persist within the firm, and being excluded from male-oriented events, all of which diminish the ability to excel with business development.

The study provides direct quotes about women attorneys' experience of business development obstacles they face:

"Lack of emphasis in training associates in how to conduct business development."

"The firm does not assist in market development."

"The star system favors certain lawyers who have greater support than the rest of us."

"We tend, like most other Americans, to focus upon short-term returns rather than on the long term."

"One is to recognize the need to tailor business development activities and networking to the particular needs and interests of women clients and women lawyers. Sporting events and old boy networks don't work for everyone."

"Too many male partners who refer [business] to each other."

"Not enough people give consideration to diversity—especially when participating in beauty contests."

The Solution

- Empowering and educating women about how to develop business from early in their careers, rather than when associates become partners.
- Encouraging and teaching associates to develop business.
- Having more women leadership positions. While we have female partners, few are in leadership roles.

There is a demonstrated return on investment. More seasoned attorneys tend to get more support, and they generate more new business. Rarely does a business investment generate such high financial returns, while also satisfying an improved culture, enhanced "good citizen" standing, improved morale, and loyalty.

Like other commitments which yield results, business development is a commitment to a *process* augmented by skills. Commitment to an outcome does not, by itself, produce the necessary results because it does not establish, reinforce or strengthen the skills needed. The desired outcome is a result of the skill development and culture change. Astonishingly, only 56% report that their firms offer resource to improve their business development efforts.

The Plan

To accelerate the process of becoming more effective with new business generation, support should be started earlier in women associates' professional life. Women attorneys report that they simply do not receive the resources they need to improve their business development efforts.

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Associates years 1 – 3

Provide a deliberate focus on how to maintain existing relationships with colleagues and classmates, as well as associates who leave the firm. Provide more sophisticated communication skill development. To augment the needed skills of advocacy and competition, offer training on inquiry skills. To support developing relationships with male clients, provide pointers on how to socialize without being misconstrued as unprofessional or flirtatious.

While it is important to have events which are inclusive of men and women, and there is a danger to presuming the solution lies in separate events, it is possible to use stereotypes for fun and profit. Recently, a NY law firm initiated a creative event—sponsoring a shoe shopping and fashion show for women associates, clients and client prospects.

Associates years 4 – 6

Training focused on more deliberate communication expertise, bridging style differences, hosting events, and volunteering for leadership positions with alumni, community and bar associations. Encourage participation in committees and other firm leadership opportunities to enhance relationships and visibility within the firm. Create opportunities for natural mentor relationships to flourish, or modify firm culture and incentives to reward natural mentors among the partnership.

Specifically address issues of power and influence.

Associates years 7 – 8

This training builds on the skills which have been developed over the first six years in the job. If business development skills have been neglected, it's a steep curve to leap over in year seven. When consistent habits of relationship building, community and professional involvement, and planning have been fostered, seasoned associates can apply those skills to business development.

Have associates join “pitch groups” to learn marketing research skills, how to cross sell, team selling and creating and giving a “pitch.” In “pitch groups,” the rubber hits the road. What was learned previously is applied in “real” selling situation where more experienced attorneys participate.

At this time, more focus is placed on the components of a successful beauty contest, identifying prospects where you have little competition, responsible follow-up, and client satisfaction.

Culture

Firm culture can foster or damage these efforts. For example, a firm which regularly ensures that partners include women attorneys at client meetings, increases their visibility and exposure to success.

Firm practices regarding sexual harassment within the firm and with big clients can help or hinder the efforts, especially in quasi-social settings.

Attitudes, such as a pejorative interpretation of assertive women, assuming women will not be available for firm events after hours or for travel, failure to accommodate child care related conflicts, or the absence of women in firm management, limit women's success and therefore firm revenue.

The barrier here may be attitudes and firm culture, which may focus on billable hours to the exclusion of skill development and related investments.

It may provide some relief to know that just including more business development activities is not correlated with high originations. It is the specific nature of the activities which yields the results.

Younger associates who don't yet have their own business origination may be developing new business and not be compensated or recognized, depending on the firm and even sometimes the partner. This also suggests that as business grows, it keeps growing—another argument for starting the process early.