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Women in the Profession

What Does it Take to Build a Book of Business?

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Special to the Legal

There is no doubt about it. For attorneys, business is a necessary key to success. It means independence, autonomy and, even more importantly, security in these uncertain times. According to the golden rule, the one that has the gold makes the rules. While that credo rings just as true for men and women, female attorneys have traditionally had a tricky time attracting a robust stable of clients. These days successful, client-laden female attorneys are hardly an endangered species. That said, the legal profession could certainly use some more.

BECOME AN EXPERT

One proven strategy for success is to develop an expertise. In other words, become the “go-to” in your field. This bit of advice is personified by Katherine Keefe, a leading health care attorney who dispenses advice to hospitals and health care providers on a daily basis. For Keefe, the story began in law school, when she took a part-time job in the legal department of a major Philadelphia hospital. She quickly realized that health care was a great fit and one that she has subsequently built her career around. It should come as no surprise then that with the state of



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health care and health care law in constant flux, Keefe's skills are in regular demand.

Keefe honed her expertise as an in-house attorney at major managed care providers and then made the transition to law firm life, taking with her a healthy book of business. “Health care presents constant challenges,” explained Keefe, which means she is always tracking the latest changes in what is already a highly complex field. When it comes to further enhancing her reputation,

Keefe said she hits the speaking circuit and tries to “put herself out there” as a credible source to help potential clients navigate an ever-shifting landscape.

STAY PASSIONATE

Love what you do. Clients are attracted to passionate attorneys. That zeal is the equivalent of honey to bees. Just ask Barbra Ilsen, a maven corporate attorney with an almost endless list of clients. Ilsen brings her laser-like focus to everything she does. In her sun-filled office, festooned with plants and family photos, she said her philosophy is simple: “I make sure that my clients' needs are being met at all times.” It is a mantra that her clients have come to count on 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Ilsen's devotion to her clients goes beyond the realm of the latest corporate transaction. Instead, more frequently than not, Ilsen's clients become friends. On any given weekend, it is not unusual for Ilsen to be racing off to a wedding or bat mitzvah for a client's child. Likewise, when Ilsen has a big event planned, her clients are an important part.

For Ilsen, being a woman has never been an impediment to attracting business. Ilsen, who describes herself as “girly,” said “I've never denied who I am.” She believes that listening, forging

personal relationships and providing the best possible results for her clients, both big and small, have helped her achieve no shortage of success. Behind it all, she said, is her passion for what she does, which for Ilsen has translated into a hefty book of business.

SEND FLOWERS

Name a high-profile corporation and there is a good chance that Sherry Lowe Johnson represents them in some capacity. Johnson, an energetic multi-tasker, provides financial, bankruptcy and employment advice to a who's-who list of multi-national conglomerates. Johnson's ongoing success reflects her legal skills, but getting her foot in the door — at least initially — was the result of smart thinking and strategy. For instance, Johnson explained that if she attends a conference on the hunt for new clients, she will cultivate friendships with female in-house attorneys. She said that they tend to have more in common (i.e., busy schedules filled with kids and outside obligations) and the potentially awkward pitfalls of soliciting business from men are absent. Once the friendship is established, Johnson keeps in touch by sending flowers for special events and rarely forgets to send off a birthday card. "It is a great way to stay in contact and to let people know that you are thinking of them," Johnson said.

STAYING POWER

Landing a client is step one. Long-term client retention, however, is the ultimate goal. A favorite example is the story of the rainmaker who got her start by picking up the phone and, after realizing that the call was intended for another attorney who had long since left her firm, managed to provide such excellent advice that she soon had a devoted Fortune 50

client. Though the phone call might have been luck, the fact that the female attorney has retained the client for years speaks to her exceptional skills and the level of service she is able to provide. The moral of the story is that it is not enough to land the client — the goal is to keep the client perpetually satisfied.

THANK YOU, FACEBOOK

Margaret Gatti, a powerhouse attorney who focuses her practice on international transactions and regulatory affairs, has built up her already substantial client base by conducting regular webinars. Gatti, who regularly lectures and publishes on issues like export controls, landed her first client, an aspiring exporter of log cabins, after giving a talk on international commercial terms. The evolution of the Web has allowed her to package and deliver that expertise more broadly to her entire client base, including the log cabin folks, and even beyond.

It is beyond dispute. Technological innovations have made staying in touch as easy as the click of a mouse. Instead of catching up with old friends every five years at high school reunions, Facebook, Twitter and email allow people to feel connected all of the time. Though nothing replaces face-to-face contact, the Internet is a useful tool to keep connections fresh. Everyone agrees that relationships are vital to establishing business. The Internet makes maintenance that much easier. So catch up with old friends and make new friends. Join LinkedIn, send out that E-Alert and start blogging.

THE TAKEAWAY

Success stories come in all shapes and sizes. Though there is no foolproof approach to attracting clients, here are a few tips:

- **Get out there.** Clients are not going to be banging on your office

door. It is one thing to work hard, but you need to circulate. Join a book club, become involved in an organization, attend conferences.

- **Market internally.** Make sure that the other lawyers that you work with know you and what you do. Do not be afraid to promote yourself.

- **Know when something is not working.** In other words, have the ability to recognize when a marketing technique is falling flat. At that point, switch gears and move on.

- **Keep existing clients informed of the latest legal developments.** It is a great way to continue to grow the relationship and to let the clients know that they matter.

Remember, everyone is a potential rainmaker. Now, more than ever, female attorneys need to give it a try. •