Rainmaking Tips for Women: A Primer

By Michelle Foster – March 10, 2011

Women constituted a mere 16 percent of equity partners in U.S. law firms in 2009—unchanged from 2008 and barely up from 2006—according to the National Association of Women Lawyers' latest Survey on the Status of Women in Law Firms. Almost half of firms have no women among their top 10 rainmakers; another third have only one woman among their top 10. The imbalance is having an increasingly negative effect on women. Rainmakers tend to be better compensated and are more likely to hold positions of power. It also makes them more marketable should they choose to switch firms. "If women attorneys have any hopes of achieving a longer life span in the modern law firm, they must learn to generate business," confirms Stephanie J. Cohen, a partner at McCarter & English (in "The Importance of Business Development for Women Attorneys," The Woman Advocate, Volume 15, Number 2, Winter 2010).

What do women need to do to join the ranks of the top rainmakers? In 2007, Harry Keshet, founder of Keshet Consulting, conducted the Women Attorneys Business Development Study and discovered there were six predictors of high originations for women lawyers: (1) years of legal experience; (2) time spent on business development; (3) using a targeted approach; (4) participation in pitch meetings; (5) cross-selling other firm services; and (6) asking clients for introductions to others who may need legal services.

I interviewed several top female rainmakers, who confirmed that these are indeed some of the essential factors for ensuring your rainmaking efforts are successful.

Make It Part of Your Daily Routine

One of the most consistent responses I received was the importance of making business development part of your life's fabric. It has to become part of you and something you do every day. Think about it when you're driving or taking a shower. "Who are you going to call? Who haven't you talked to or worked with in a while? How are you going to get your message in front of people who need your services? These are the questions you need to be asking yourself," says April Miller Boise, partner-in-charge and a member of Thompson Hine's executive committee. Attorneys should start this as early as possible. Boise began focusing on business development as a sixth-year associate and believes she should have started sooner.

The Keshet study found a direct correlation between the amount of time spent on business development and the amount of business generated, with 15 hours a month being the recommended minimum. Some days you may spend just 15 minutes on business development, which is OK. The key is to never let it disappear from your daily routine. A brilliant woman once told me, “Everything you focus on, you will accomplish in some measure.” The same is true for business development.

The activities can consist of emails, regular mail, calls, or in-person meetings. Mix it up. Send people articles you think might interest them; call them on their birthday; invite them to lunch. Do something to let them know that they’re on your radar.

The biggest mistake attorneys make is to forgo business development because they are too busy with other tasks or believe all they need to do to get ahead is perform high-quality work and bill significant hours. That is no longer enough.

Be Organized

Set up a tracking system so you don’t call the same people every day. One partner I know creates a page for everyone she meets and then makes notes each time she connects with the person. She is able to see how long it has been since she has been in touch and schedule a time in her calendar when she should reach out again.

The more organized you are, the more successful you will be. “You should prioritize and be strategic in your efforts,” agrees Boise. “Ask yourself what services or solutions you are selling and who you can sell them to. And be realistic about a company’s need for your services. That will help you prioritize your time.” For instance, ask yourself whether repeat business or an ongoing relationship is likely from potential clients.

In addition to Keshet’s six predictors, Anna Giabourani, of counsel at Withers Bergman, says there are four key things one must do to build business: “(1) be able to speak intelligently to a potential client about a variety of legal issues; (2) build a relationship of trust and confidence; (3) follow up on every meeting; and (4) keep in touch with old and new contacts.”

Instill Trust and Confidence

Picking up on Giabourani’s second point, people give business to people they trust. “Trust is the currency of business. Without it, you won't get the work, no matter how good a lawyer you are,” notes Katherine D. Brandt, partner-in-charge of commercial and public finance at Thompson Hine. Whether it is through work on your child’s soccer team or your church’s fundraising committee, try to expand your community and personal relationships so that these people think of you whenever they need legal help. You should also participate in industry events, such as those put on by your local bar association or law school alumni association.

While it is important to explain what you do so that people remember it (i.e., your elevator pitch) Brandt observed that “most lawyers talk too much about themselves, their own capabilities, and their firm's capabilities instead of listening to what the client needs or wants.” She says you need to let people know you care about their problems. Ask what you can do to help them personally or professionally or who you can introduce them to in your network.

How to Pose the Question

Though there are certainly differences in style, you should come up with a way to ask for. After all, the person on the other side of the table is probably expecting it. So go ahead and try it. The more confident you appear, the more successful you will be.

Here’s how Brandt does it: “I always ask people directly for business or what I can do to obtain their business.” She also applies Keshet's sixth predictor: “I ask current clients, friends, and colleagues to introduce me to people who might be able to use my particular services.”

“I tell people I would love to have the opportunity to work with them or that I think I could help them,” adds Jennifer D. Silverman, a partner at Ellenoff Grossman & Schole. ”I start by developing a relationship with someone and then I support them professionally however I can, for example, by letting them know about a job in their field or about a business opportunity for their company.”

On balance, women are not as aggressive when it comes to asking for business. If that describes you, you might want to try a slightly different approach. "I never ask people directly for business. My goal is to spend time with them sharing pertinent things about my work so they understand what I can do for them," explains Giabourani.

Boise advises that "When asking for work, it is helpful to give concrete examples of similar deals you have done. And if a current client is happy with your work, don't forget to suggest that they think of you for future assignments and recommend you to others."

Promote Your Work

You also have to "get out there." When Junghye (June) Yeum decided to focus on international arbitration, did she just sign up for a few CLE courses and hope people noticed? No. She attended major international arbitration events, where she interacted with key players and attended informative sessions. She also published an article in the field and started letting everyone know that she was practicing in the international arbitration arena. She is now a partner in Baker & McKenzie's global dispute resolution practice group and has handled numerous international arbitration cases. She also serves on the panel of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva and is frequently invited to speak at major global dispute resolution conferences around the world. Establishing credentials like these creates its own rainmaking magic.

Boise confirms that you have to "get beyond the walls of your office. Speak on panels, write articles, start a blog, host a webinar."

Don't forget to promote yourself inside your firm, too. Since 80 percent of new business comes from existing clients, you need to let others in your firm know what you do—this includes partners, staffing managers, and the marketing department. Bone up on the business needs of some of the firm's clients to determine if they could benefit from your services. If yes, ask for an individual appointment or to accompany the client team on its next meeting.

Find Common Ground

You need to think about these things every day so that you will be ready to take advantage of key opportunities when they arise. Boise did just that as a sixth-year associate during her first meeting with a senior vice president (SVP) from a Fortune 100 manufacturer in the automotive industry. The company was a Thompson Hine client but was not currently using them for its corporate work. April was asked to host the SVP while he was in Thompson Hine's office for other meetings. She had interned at several automotive companies while growing up in Detroit, so she was able to intelligently and passionately discuss the industry with him while he was waiting for his meetings to begin. When his meetings concluded, he asked her to work with the company to draw up documents about the deal he had just negotiated. She gave the project high priority and focused on delivering superior work and great client service, ultimately helping to close the transaction. Over time, the company became a significant corporate client. Find out what you have in common with a potential client and build from there. Don't be shy and don't let opportunities pass you by.

Another partner said that three of her key clients were initially her adversaries in three separate cases. Once those transactions closed, each approached her for future representation. Assume you are always being evaluated and deliver the best, most professional service possible.

Learn about Your Client

One of the most repeated mantras about business development is to learn about the client's business. The more you truly understand their industry, products, and services; their goals and challenges; and their primary competitors, the more you will be valued as a solutions provider.

The biggest mistake people make when it comes to business development, agrees Giabourani, is "not having studied their potential client in advance, underestimating a client's level of sophistication, failing to understand a client's likes, dislikes, culture, limitations and fears, coming across as too arrogant, presumptuous or inflexible, not respecting a client's timeline, and/or exerting too much pressure on someone to give you business."

In addition to learning about your client, "Don't forget to find out what resources are available to you within your firm, like a client entertainment budget, and to take advantage of them," reminds Silverman. You also need to understand the different areas of expertise in your firm, says Boise, so that you can direct clients to other attorneys who may be able to help them. If you set up the relationship, she adds, "don't drop the ball. Talk to the client regularly and candidly about how the team is doing. If there are criticisms, make sure the client knows you're taking them seriously and that they will be remedied."

What Can Firms Do?
Firms need to understand the importance of providing business development and leadership training (one-on-one or in groups) to attorneys early in their careers. They should incentivize lawyers to spend time on business development and encourage senior lawyers to share their ideas and to establish mentoring relationships with junior lawyers. They should also include more women, minorities, and junior lawyers on pitch teams.

At Thompson Hine, Boise says they have a special women's initiative called Spotlight on Women that hosts and sponsors premier events, including seminars, panel presentations, networking receptions, and roundtable discussions. The firm's lawyers are, thus, able to showcase their achievements and network with other professional women. The group also helps the firm's lawyers create professional development plans and advance their leadership potential.

Be Patient
Of course, all of this takes time. It is a progressive process. The more time you spend doing it, the more skilled you will become. In the beginning, it may appear futile. "Typically, it will take five or more meetings with a potential client before they actually give me business, and those meetings may occur over a period of a couple of years," acknowledges Brandt.

"It may take up to 10 months of continuous follow-up—including presentations, marketing materials, and even free advice—before you get any work from a new client. The key to success is to be persistent and patient and make sure you're in the prospective client's mind as a potential service provider," says Giabourani.

Boise calls it "The Rule of 7 Touches." "You have to talk to someone seven times before it turns into business. Though it might be a bit more or less, it helps to think of it in those terms. You have to be consistent and persistent." And don't be overly ambitious. One new client a year, depending on the size of their business, could be good enough in some cases. Have a strategy and set specific goals for yourself.

Deliver Superior Service
A note of warning: Don't let your desire to bring in new clients distract you from providing your existing clients with superior service. Once your existing clients start telling everyone they know about you and you fine tune your own business development efforts, you will be well on your way to being a successful rainmaker.

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