

Five Ways to Get Introductions to Potential New Clients

By Wilbur Swan

It's no secret that the current financial crisis and increasingly tight market conditions affect law firms and their ability to win new business. It is also no secret that business is won based on strong relationships, now more than ever. Law firms and lawyers are exhausting all avenues to retain existing clients, cross-sell services and acquire new business.

We asked a well-known business development coach, Jim Cranston, vice president at Hildebrandt's Client Growth and Development Practice, about some best practices. He observes of recent new business efforts, "The big change is the technologies. Senior associates and young partners are using the new technologies to develop business, and it's working."

Technology can now support the quest to find and leverage your extended network of relationships, as well as your firm's, more quickly and comprehensively than was possible before. Attorneys are becoming sophisticated at using public social networking sites, lawyer-specific online resources, online magazines, blogs and corporate relationship search technology to find these "hidden" connections. Here are five best practices to build and leverage your network using technology that is readily available to law firms today.

Number 5: Raise your visibility

This can be as simple as making your biography and expertise available online. Online social networks such as LinkedIn, Plaxo and Facebook, and legal networks like Legal OnRamp, give you an opportunity to become "searchable" to contacts and clients looking for your services and expertise in given practice areas. You simply need to sign up, enter your data and begin to create connections with your network.

You can include as much or as little information as you'd like. For example, you can post questions and answers to your LinkedIn network, keep an ongoing blog and join groups, both social and professional, in Facebook. You control the content as well as the connections.

And, as you know, most online searches start with Google. Your LinkedIn profile will typically appear high in the list of results for a Google search on your name, providing a nice additional way to shape your online profile.

Number 4: Get recognition

Drive your own PR machine. Start getting noticed both offline and online by making your voice heard. This means joining industry associations, speaking at national industry events and local chapter meetings, attending networking events and joining boards.

Writing and commenting for online law magazines and in legal blogs and participating in webinars are great ways to have your name become known. You don't have to be a professional writer to get your thoughts read and respected by prospects and peers, and the more people hear your voice and your insight, the more likely they'll think of you when looking to retain legal expertise. Your writing becomes an extension of your resume, and it

is all available online. When someone is choosing to retain you or another attorney, they will do an online search, and it is impressive if you have written and commented on the subject.

Number 3: Leverage your network

Dig deep into your entire network of “who you know.” This includes other attorneys, past coworkers, employers, clients, consultants you’ve worked with, agencies you’ve used, accountants, friends, classmates and extended family members.

This isn’t a new idea, but technology has made it much more manageable. Finding and reaching out to all of these people through sites like LinkedIn, Facebook and Plaxo increases your reach. These sites are not just for teens and college students looking to socialize. Professionals are using these sites as a way to reconnect and drum up business either through past colleagues or through their colleagues’ networks.

As Jayne Navarre, social networking consultant, recently commented during a webinar on the topic, “Using technology and online networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn to reach out and find former clients, bosses and colleagues is definitely taking off, especially for the Gen X attorneys.”

This “Six Degrees of Separation” approach has found its way online for professional networking, and it pays to know these online networks, how they work, and to find out who from your own network is already on them. You will be surprised to see how many of your business contacts are using online networks to communicate and connect with others, and it gives you a good reason to dust off the old rolodex and move it online.

Number 2: Leverage your Clients and Their Connections

Understanding who your clients know and tapping into *their* relationship networks is useful for landing new business or expanding existing contracts.

According to Cranston, “I recommend that lawyers first seek to better understand their clients. For example, ask your clients what will help grow their business, which allows firm to then learn about their clients. Relationship partners are then moving closer to a meaningful introduction.” LinkedIn, for example, is a useful way to see who your contacts know, and to begin this process.

Technology now gives attorneys the ability to look into a referral source’s network to get a better sense of how clients’ networks can make the most sense for their practice. You can now do your own diligence on who your clients may know that would be a good match for your services. It’s another way to use information intelligently and make the best use of your client’s referral network. And when you see a contact you would like to meet, be sure to ask for the introduction. You won’t get it unless you ask.

Number 1: Leverage Your Own Firm’s Connections

Your firm and your colleagues have thousands of valuable relationships. You should be tapping these to grow your business. The challenge has been understanding what relationships exist across offices and practice groups. In the past, when preparing for a new business meeting, attorneys typically sent out a broadcast request, “Does anyone know the CEO of Company ABCD?” or wandered up and down halls knocking on colleagues’ doors. This rarely yields useful results, and in the Internet age, is only scratching the surface of what is possible.

Social networking technology or Enterprise Relationship Management (ERM) technology has been adapted to suit the environment of law firms by balancing efficiency and privacy. The software can identify contacts within the extended networks of all employees, mapping who

your firm knows by analyzing address books, e-mail traffic patterns, time and billing systems, CRM systems and other corporate data. It also ranks contacts by "strength of relationship" and requires no data entry from attorneys or others. Dozens of law firms, and their attorneys, are already using this type of technology today for new business to easily search their company's database of important, influential relationships.

Start Now

Getting a foot in the door with new clients is always challenging. Social networking sites, blogs, webinars and enterprise social networking technology are the new tools in today's market to help make that easier. Educate yourself about the resources, sites and online networks available. Send a note to your firm's marketing team to learn your firm's plans for using corporate social networking technology. Make sure you have every advantage available. It takes a little bit of time to get started. Once you are started, you will learn what works for you and then tune your efforts. In the end, with these five steps, you will be surprised how easy it is, and how little effort it takes, to leverage these new technologies.

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