When I Was an Associate

Ten Things I Wish I'd Known About Business Development

By Lana A. Olson

The things that you do now will lead to business later. So get started.

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Ask any rainmaker and they will tell you the same thing: they didn't wait until they became partners to start thinking about business development. They started thinking about it when they were still associates, and most of them from day one. Why? Because business relationships don't develop overnight. They take time and energy. They require continuous, conscious effort. But most of all, they require adopting good business development habits early.

Unfortunately, most associates focus so much on the legal work in front of them (and rightfully so) that they fail to think about anything else. While learning to be a great lawyer is basic and critical, it is a mistake to think that clients will hire you just because you are smart, hardworking, and likeable. For clients to hire you or recommend you, they need to *know* you; they need to *trust* you. And neither of these will happen if you all you do is sit in an office staring at a computer screen every day.

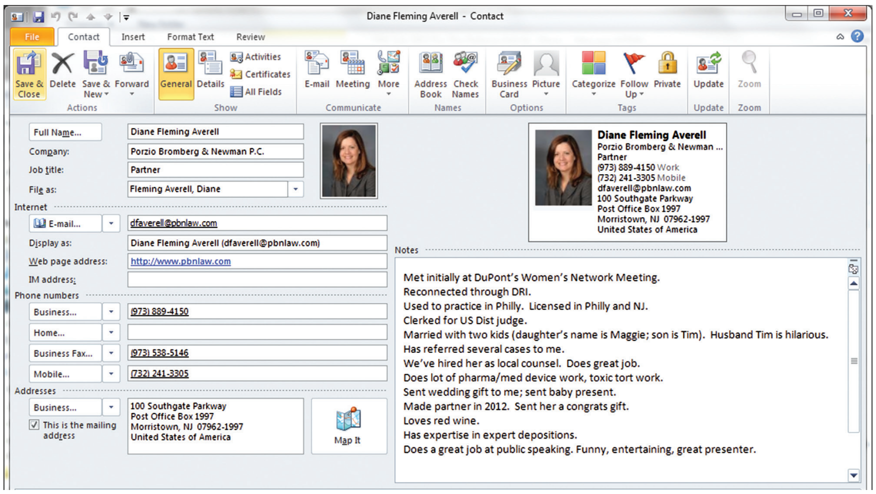
So, as an associate, what can you do *now* that will lead to business generation *later*? It just so happens that I have 10 suggestions for things that I wish I'd known about business development when I was an associate.

Number 1: Having a good, interesting, up-to-date firm bio is critical. You must review it regularly, update it as often as you can, and make sure that it fully represents your capabilities. It's a good idea to put it in your calendar to review your bio once a quarter. And, if you get a good result in a case, receive a promotion to a leadership position, write an article, or achieve something else of note, you should make sure to add that information to your bio. No one is impressed by a bio that only mentions where you went to law school, earning a 4.0 GPA, and that you litigate. Be interesting. Be authentic. Look at other lawyers' web bios and find ones that you think are really great, and then figure out what makes them so good and try to emulate them. There are two lawyers in my firm who I think have tremendous bios. They're interesting, informative, and they actually tell you something about the lawyers and their practices. If you're looking for good examples, look at these: http://lightfootlaw.com/alabama-lawyer/jackson-r-sharman and http://lightfootlaw.com/alabama-lawyer/terrence-w-mccarthy.

Number 2: Make your contacts meaningful. Buy some nice, professional personalized stationary, or at least get some from your firm that you can use. Then use it! In today's world of neverending e-mail, when a real note comes in the mail it really stands out. Send a note when someone makes partner, receives a leadership role in an organization, has a baby, or gets married. You get the picture. These kinds of thoughtful acts are meaningful and help create personal relationships. So, make thoughtfulness a habit.

Number 3: Remember that your contacts today can become your clients tomorrow. So make sure you have a good system for maintaining your list of contacts. Fortunately, you have at your disposal a tremendous tool: Outlook Contacts, or something similar. My Outlook Contacts database is my "electronic rolodex." When I need to recommend someone to someone else, I go to it. After I meet new people, regardless of the occasions, I add them to it. When it comes time to send out holiday cards, I crossreference it. You should constantly add to your contacts database, starting with day one of your law practice. "Wait," you say, "I don't know anyone yet. I just started practicing!" Oh, but you do. Think about your law school contacts. Put them in your database. One of these days, they may become in-house counsel and need to hire a lawyer. Contacts from your community involvement? Put them in. Think about cocounsel who you worked with on cases. Put them in too. Heck, if you met someone interesting on an airplane and got his or her business card, put that person in. The important thing is to make a habit of doing this every time you meet someone. Get a business card, write down where you met the person, something to make you remember him or her, and then have your assistant add the person as a matter of course.

Every time I return from a seminar I hand over a stack of business cards or notes on attendee rosters to my assistant so that she can add contacts to my database. On each card I've written something about the person, whether it's where I met him or her, such as "sat next to her at DRI dine-round dinner at WITL seminar 2013," or something interesting I learned about the person, such as "her husband owns an art gallery," or something else to jog my memory, like "does securities work." My assistant includes these notes in the Outlook Contacts entry and also cuts and pastes the person's photo into the entry so that I can recall the person instantly. So, as an example, here is one of my contacts:



A screen shot of one of the author's contacts.

Number 4: Look for opportunities to meet new people and to reconnect with people you already know. The marketing rule of thumb generally is that it takes between six and nine "touches" with someone before the person feels that he or she knows enough about you to consider sending you work. Start offering those "touches" now so that they can grow over time. Start with people around your age. Make contacts with everyone you can at or close to your own level. Don't worry about trying to meet every general counsel at a seminar. While it's a nice acquaintance if you can make it, I can tell you with utmost certainty that it's highly unlikely that the general counsel of Fortune 500 company "X" is going to send you a case as an associate. But what I can tell you is that lots of the lawyers that you know now will work in-house at some point later and may be willing to send a case to you. People your age now will also become partners in their law firms and will have the ability to recommend lawyers to their clients. So make sure that you keep in touch with them so that they can refer work to you when the time comes. So don't worry so much about the big fish. Start with the tadpoles and get to know them. The main thing is to keep up the communication so that it continues over time because one day, the people that you know now will be positions to hire or recommend you.

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Number 5: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Any time that you give someone's name out as a referral you should let the person know that you referred someone to them. Even if he or she doesn't get the case, he or she will appreciate it and remember what you did. And hopefully, that person will return the favor one day. Think strategically whenever you have a chance to give a referral to someone. Don't waste that chance. Make sure that you send the person to the right place, but make sure that the right place is somewhere likely to return the favor in some way. And if someone refers a case to you, you absolutely must thank him or her. If you don't get the case, a nice thank you note is fine. If you do get the case, consider sending a bottle of wine or something else (assuming that your state's ethics rules permit it, of course) to make sure that he or she knows that you appreciate the referral.

Number 6: Use "down time" to do something to raise your visibility and get your name out. Speak on something. Join a committee in an organization. Write an article. You have lots and lots of opportunities to publish, locally and nationally. But you can't publish if you don't write and submit your work.

Number 7: Have an "elevator speech" that you can deliver to anyone, any time, explaining what you do and what your firm does. If you cannot explain this to someone in two or three sentences and the person can't walk away actually knowing what you do, then you're not doing it right. This is harder than it seems. You will need to think about it and practice. After many years, my current "elevator speech" goes something like this: "I'm a trial lawyer at a mid-size litigation only firm in Birmingham, Alabama. All we do is try cases, and I defend companies that get sued for toxic torts, product liability, class actions, or business disputes." Marianne Trost, one of my favorite people in the world and a business development coach to attorneys, told me once that "an elevator pitch is less about reciting to someone all of your credentials and more about telling someone what you do in a way that makes him or her want to learn more."

Number 8: Talk to people. Everywhere you go. Leave the office. Do things that you enjoy. Volunteer. Play organized sports. Become involved in a trade organization. The point is that you never, ever, know who or what will lead to picking up business.

Number 9: Always have business cards with you. Always. And use them.

Number 10: If you haven't joined LinkedIn, you need to. Remember that this is not Facebook. LinkedIn has a professional focus, so make sure that whatever you post is business appropriate. So, no pictures of you snow skiing in Utah or partying in New Orleans. Then, once you have a profile, make sure that it's updated and interesting, similar to your firm bio. When you meet someone professionally, ask him or her to connect with you on LinkedIn while you are fresh in the person's mind, meaning as soon as you return from a seminar or from wherever else you returned. It's a great way to keep up with people and let them know about your professional achievements.

Conclusion

How much time you spend on business development will grow over the years. As a first-year lawyer, get started and get used to developing good habits, but spend most of your time learning to be a lawyer. As the years go on, you will meet more people and have more experience, and your opportunities will increase. The longer that you practice, the more time you should devote to this. If you can start out as a new associate staying in touch with your contacts, occasionally going to a networking event, and coauthoring an article, that's a great goal. Then as you practice longer, increase the amount of time that you spend on the activities I suggest that you undertake in this article.

Look, I get it. I was once an associate, too. It's hard to think about giving up "billable time" to spend time on things that don't count toward this year's bonus, especially when you're just trying to keep your head above water. But aside from the fact that doing all these things will really help you in the long term, they really don't take that much time, and quite frankly, they can lead to some really great personal and professional friendships in addition to having business potential.

These things take time, often many years. But the things that you do now will lead to business later. So get started. Trust me. It'll be worth it in the long run.The main thing is to keep up the communication so that it continues over time because one day, the people that you know now will be positions to hire or recommend you. FTD