

# Playing the Long Game: Client Development Strategies for Young Lawyers

**Making the effort to build lasting relationships and garner a good reputation early is key to long-term success.**

**BY ERIC R. NITZ**

*From the Editor: Today, we launch our new National Law Journal series, "On the Rise: Voices from Young Lawyers." We will feature pieces from our 2019 D.C. Rising Stars and other prominent young attorneys in Washington and beyond. In their columns, the writers will tackle key topics on business development, transitioning from public to private practice (and back), successful law firm diversity practices and more. We start our series with MoloLamken's Eric Nitz, who writes about how young lawyers can build successful strategies for client development.*

—Lisa Helem, editor-in-chief, *The National Law Journal*

Client development can seem to be one of the most mystifying aspects of legal practice. That's particularly true for younger lawyers. Law schools (usually) do not teach client-development strategies, and most firms do not prioritize client-development training, formal or otherwise, for their associates or new partners. But business development boils down to a basic principle: clients only hire lawyers that they know and trust. Earning their confidence does not happen overnight. It takes time. For young lawyers, that is good news. With long careers ahead of them, time is the one critical



advantage and valuable asset that even the most senior rainmakers lack.

With the right strategies, a young lawyer can excel at business development and can build his or her own client base. The earlier in a career that a lawyer begins thinking about client development, the more opportunities that lawyer will have for building trust and confidence with potential clients.

## **Develop a Sterling, Outward-Facing Reputation**

At some level, every lawyer understands the importance of a professional reputation. But often, younger lawyers are more concerned about their reputations within the firm than without. After all, one's reputation within the

firm can influence promotion decisions and, at some firms, compensation. But a lawyer's reputation outside the firm is what causes a potential client to seek out that lawyer's expertise or assistance.

Of course, that does not mean young lawyers should not be concerned with their reputations inside the firm. Often, a reputation as a top associate who can get things done will beget the outward-facing opportunities that help an associate develop his or her own reputation and identity as a lawyer.

### **Demonstrate Expertise and Competence**

The opportunities to interact with others outside the firm are a great opportunity to develop a reputation for expertise and competence. It goes without saying that, when those opportunities arise, lawyers should bring their "A game."

But even when such opportunities are not forthcoming, young lawyers can take the initiative and demonstrate their expertise in other ways. For example, young lawyers might seek out opportunities to write for legal publications, analyzing developments in the law. They might develop and present a continuing legal

education course at a conference. They might organize and moderate a panel discussion. Each of these activities offers a platform to demonstrate expertise and knowledge in front of potential in-house counsel or clients.

### **Cast a Wide Net When Thinking About Potential Clients**

Many younger lawyers mistakenly think too narrowly when they contemplate who qualifies as a potential client. For example, some lawyers do not view other litigators at law firms as sources of business. That is a mistake. Lawyers within and outside of your firm, who might make referrals of potential clients, can be great sources of business. This idea takes us back to the key principle described above: Lawyers only make referrals to lawyers whom they know and trust.

Likewise, a younger lawyer may not see much value (from a client-development perspective) in attending a law school reunion, because he or she may have graduated only a few years ago and no classmates are yet in a position to refer work or make attorney-hiring decisions for corporate clients. Of course, today's recent law

school graduates are tomorrow's heads of litigation at Fortune 500 companies.

By staying connected with friends and colleagues from law school as careers progress in parallel, young lawyers will have a long runway to develop trust and confidence. That trust will make the young lawyer a natural choice when former classmates transition to in-house roles or begin developing a client-base of their own from which to make referrals.

At its core, client development is, more than anything else, a way of thinking about professional relationships and professional activities. Putting in the effort to begin building long-term relationships of confidence and trust will put a young lawyer's greatest client-development asset—time—to work and will yield great dividends when it comes time to contribute to the firm's client-base.

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