

Thoughts for Junior Attorneys Seeking to Build Their Practices



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By Sarah R. Goodman and David G. Mandelbaum | Oct. 3, 2018 | The Legal Intelligencer

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David G. Mandelbaum: Let's talk about where you want your practice to go. What advice can I offer you about your business development efforts?

Sarah R. Goodman: How do I continue to focus on honing my legal skills while also developing my own book of business? Most of my relationships are not currently in position to send me work.

Mandelbaum: Well, there are three questions there: (a) What should you do if your network isn't full of prospects? (b) What else should you be doing? (c) How do you find time given all the other demands of practice at the beginning of your career? Let's take the middle one first. Suppose one of your friends—or one of your friends' friends or that woman you met at that seminar last week—is able to hire you. That person would need something to bolster his or her

say-so that you were the right person to hire. He or she would have to point to some position you hold, some article you wrote, some speech you gave, some experience you have had, or the like. That sort of marketing has to be part of your routine. If you wait until the day you need them, you're already too late.

Goodman: I try to take advantage of as many of those kinds of opportunities as I can, trying to convince potential clients that I'm the right person to hire. Still, if I say yes to everything, I'll spread myself too thin. But if I say no, I could miss a potential opportunity. Maybe trying to engage clients boils down to finding a specialty, but as a young lawyer, part of me thinks it plays to my advantage by increasing exposure to all types of work.

Mandelbaum: Speaking, writing, blogging and so forth can be in any area in which you feel you have something to offer. But when you suggest to a potential client that you would like to be engaged—what I call “sales” as opposed to “marketing”—my advice is that you only make that suggestion when you think it is fair to say that choosing you—or you and your colleagues at the firm—would be a good business decision for the client. You don't want your first piece of advice to a client be a bad one.

Young lawyers often can be the right choice, or at least one of the right choices. You just have to figure out the clients and circumstances where that holds true.

Goodman: Makes sense. Sell what I know—be confident in my work product, as well as that which my colleagues at the firm, can deliver.

Mandelbaum: It's more than that. I'm an environmental lawyer. You are a better choice than me for an employment matter, which is your area, not mine. And depending on the scope of the matter, you may also be a better choice than a senior employment lawyer. Someone with a small matter might be one of your most important clients because you will think about that client's problems even on the drive to work, whereas that matter likely won't occupy that same headspace of a more established lawyer.

You may just fit with the client better than someone else. I don't tweet, speak Pokémon Go or “pin” anything on Pinterest. I barely know what they are, for example. Then, there is price. As someone who has been practicing since 1983, as opposed to 2014, I'm a lot more expensive by the hour.

Goodman: So not only sell what I know, but also know how to sell and manage the engagement.

Read clients and know how to predict their needs before they necessarily know they need it, leverage my entire firm's personnel and resources, all while minding the client's purse strings.

Mandelbaum: Right. These are essential elements to building your practice, and you have to make a conscious decision to prioritize doing that. Remember, this, too, is part of your job. If you don't tend your practice, you're not likely to have much legal work, regardless of where you work.

Don't make it seem overwhelming. People ask for your judgment on substance every day. Apply that judgment to the business challenge clients face when choosing a lawyer. Will that judgment evolve over time? Of course. But you are not bereft now. If you were, you would be out of work, right?

Goodman: Thanks. And don't worry, I'll make sure to refer any environmental-related matters your way.

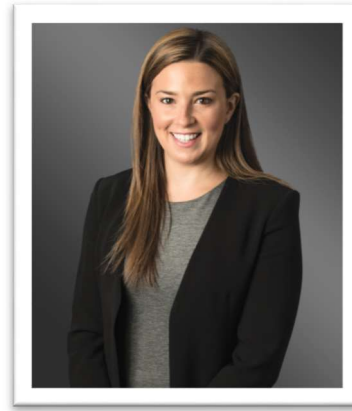
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