The Client Behind the Glass

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When Alice stepped into her mirror, she entered a world far different from her own. Such is the plight of many lawyers attempting to develop business and understand the world of the client. Like Alice, the world of the client often seems a ‘Wonderland’ of mixed up things and backwards logic. How then, is a lawyer to successfully build a practice in this strange environment?

Every lawyer struggles with the challenges of finding new clients. The first myth of business development that must be cast aside in this effort, is the belief that new clients are “new” and that new services are indeed “new”. Clients you didn’t have aren’t new, they have been around for some time, you just haven’t discovered them or been able to secure them. Winning new clients begins with the belief that “meeting the needs of clients” is more important than “selling services to clients.”

Clients know they have choices. Winning lawyers focus on narrowing the number of choices to just one. There is a timeless phrase that states, “You can’t know what your clients want until you ask.” The value and tenets of this phrase have guided many of America’s best organizations in their successful pursuit of an expanded market share. Corporate leaders nationwide have turned to, and become reliant on, quantitative and qualitative client data to improve existing, and create new, products and services. Today, the legal industry is faced with a consolidating base of clients and a highly competitive market for those clients. Suddenly, listening to, interacting and building relationships with clients have become “the” priority for lawyers and their firm leadership teams. “Returning to the basics,” as one law firm partner recently remarked, “means placing our clients first in all we do and listening to their opinions so we can better serve their needs;” in other words; looking behind the glass.
Success in the World Behind the Glass

Below are ten critical strategies that, when successfully deployed, increase success in developing new client business:

(1) Create a Client-First Team:
Each lawyer looking to develop more client relationships, whether a seasoned senior practitioner, or a shiny new partner, must create a team of loyal legal talent to service the client’s needs. No lawyer today is safe delegating client work to a team member who does not recognize the value of building client relationships, exceeding client expectations and maximizing client satisfaction in all that he or she does. Clients want a cohesive legal team that can provide creative and insightful solutions. Winning new clients requires focusing on what it takes to win... not who will get the credit.

(2) Create A Differentiating, Client-First Story:
Lawyers that are unable to create and communicate a differentiating story will lose far more client relationships than they win. Today, the rapid decline of “legal personalities” who created personal brands has placed many lawyers and firms in a challenging position… defining “who we are.” Clients want their lawyers or firm to know, understand and care about their needs. An effective personal or firm-wide branding strategy must begin with “who we are”, not “who we are like.”

(3) Create A Client-First Value System:
Success in securing and building valued and lasting client relationships must include creating an operating environment that encourages, rewards and recognizes client-based initiatives and accomplishments. Including a value statement for clients within the guiding principles of the firm, adding a client component to every team member’s performance evaluation, and creating awards for client service excellence are some of the ways law firms are creating a client-first value system. When thinking of clients becomes a natural, versus policy-driven, behavior, the success of this initiative will be fully appreciated.
(4) Stick To What You Do Best:
The best indicator of a successful marketer is someone who doesn’t try to be all things to all people. Clients know it... competitors know it... and organizations know when an individual is attempting to market, sell and convince others to “select us/me.”

(5) Do Your Homework:
You can never learn enough about a client (existing or potential). Successful business developers: identify specific target clients; assemble information about that client; seek the advice, guidance and knowledge of others regarding that client; understand the critical issues facing that client; isolate the “what needs-to-be-present-to-win” variables; and learn how the decision process will unfold. Information databases, shared client files, historical timelines of contacts and other business practices are typically deployed.

(6) Build Client-First Relationships:
While listening to one’s clients provides a background for action and reaction, building valued, lasting client-first relationships is essential for lawyers who desire to minimize client turnover and maximize revenue potential. Client relationships are built on trust, performance, open communications and a seamless service delivery system. Valued relationships are not “per matter,” they are ongoing and require attention.

(7) Establish Client-First Performance Metrics:
Without the proper performance metrics in place, measuring your client first initiatives and activities cannot occur. Today, a growing number of lawyers and firms are using client satisfaction scores, client retention rates, client share and client revenues as the preferred performance metrics. Some lawyers and firms have established specific measurable initiatives on the number of contacts, number of meetings and number of points of contact to create a client-first environment.

(8) Hardwire The Voice Of The Client Into Your Practice:
There is no better way to know what your clients think, prefer, want or need without soliciting their opinions. Conducting annual client interviews, creating Client Advisory groups and implementing a “what would our clients think” attitude into all decisions are a few examples of how to hardwire the voice of the client throughout your firm or team.
(9) See the Universe Through Your Client’s Eyes:
Instead of trying to beat your competitors, focus on how to help your potential client beat their competitors and help them get closer to their clients. Understand the concerns and challenges facing that client. The benchmark of true client connectivity is when you are step-for-step beside your client in their competitive challenges.

(10) Hustle, Focus and Passion:
Getting and keeping clients within the exceedingly competitive legal industry mandates a self-motivated and highly dedicated effort. Clients want to be courted, accommodated and satisfied. To be successful, lawyers must go to the client, not wait for the client to come to them. Creating a sense of urgency and a passion for finding clients will result in new clients. Waiting for the telephone to ring will not result in success. Don’t be timid about spending time, money and resources pursuing new business. Obviously there is a balance of resources invested to benefits received, but successful business developers never concede defeat before they get started.

Conclusion
Understanding the world of the client behind the looking glass will dramatically improve your opportunities to increase and enhance your client base. Business development begins, and ends, with knowing all you can know about that potential clients and their business. Now is the time to act.