

HOW A YOUNG LAWYER CAN RUN A SUCCESSFUL LAW FIRM

If you're one of the many young attorneys, with JD in hand and no job in sight, you might be thinking about opening your own law practice. Starting a law firm is easy –print some business cards and you're open for business. Running it successfully (and enjoyably) is hard. Jumping in without a plan is a recipe for failure. Law school taught you the theory of law, but to be successful as the owner of a law firm you have to also learn both the practice of law and the business of law.

The Practice of Law

The practice of law is something that law schools don't prepare students well for. How do you file or caption a motion? How do you comply with Superior Court Rule 9A? How do you schedule a hearing date? Those are issues that come up in practice every day in addition to knowing the laws, rules and procedure of your chosen practice area.

The traditional advice given to young lawyers is that you must first find a mentor. It's good advice but other lawyers are busy and you not being as well connected because you're young, it might be hard to find a lawyer to mentor you and who's willing to spend the time to answer all your questions. Solosez (operated by the ABA) is an online listserv that works like communal mentorship. Instead of having one mentor, you can have thousands of mentors from across the country. You simply post a question to the Solosez listserv and usually within the hour, you'll get an answer or even forms for your particular question. Along those same lines, MASSFORUM (operated by Lawyer's Weekly) is a local Solosez just for Massachusetts lawyers.

When you're a young attorney, chances are you have a lot of free time. A good way to learn the practice of law and also at the same time help other people, is to do volunteer work. The MBA hosts a monthly Dial-A-Lawyer night where you can give free legal advice to callers which in turn teaches you confidence in giving legal advice. Volunteer for Lawyer of the Day at the probate courts if you're a family attorney. The clerks will help and teach you while you're also helping pro se litigants. Help with The Volunteer Lawyers Project and Senior Partners for Justice to take on civil cases. They will give you administrative support, free training and free MCLE classes in return. For criminal practice, try getting on the CPCS (Committee for Public Counsel Services) list for criminal defense practice.

The Business of Law

One thing that law schools do worse than teaching the practice of law is teaching the business of law. There are only a handful of law schools in the country that offers a course on law practice management yet a majority of attorneys practice in solo or small firm settings. The business of law – how to run a law practice, manage employees, and marketing – is just as important as knowing the practice of law. After all, if you don't have clients, it doesn't matter how great your legal skills are.

Before hanging your shingle, first prepare a business plan. It doesn't have to be formal. Just write down what resources you have to fund your firm, the projected start-up costs, income sources, firm structure (LLC, PC, Partnership, etc.) and location (shared suite, virtual office, home office, etc.) The next step is

to write down a marketing plan. What are the different ways you plan on marketing your law firm and what is the cost for each of those activities? Think about a website, blog, networking groups (such as Chamber of Commerce, local trade groups, StartingOutSolo.com, Women Attorneys Network), free online directories (Avvo, Justia, JDSupra), LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, print advertisements, church and faith-based groups, seminars, newsletters and mailings. Some activities will be costly in terms of money and/or time. The key is to keep track of where your business is coming from so that you can adjust your marketing plan accordingly to get the most return for your marketing dollar.

Marketing is a continuous process. You cannot implement a marketing idea, sit back and relax, and hope that the money continues to flow in. If you stop marketing, the business will eventually stop. If you market only when you see your business dry up, you will lose credibility with your clients and they will smell your desperation and won't engage you. If you put all your marketing eggs in one basket, you run the risk of sinking your firm when the referral source dries up. As with investments, diversify.

Starting a law firm and running it successfully takes hard work, long hours and dedication. Any young attorney can do it, but it is not for every young attorney. Make sure you have what it takes and do your homework before taking the plunge.

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