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Seeding the Rain Clouds

by K.C. Victor

There are some excellent lawyers whose lives and careers will never be their own because they do not control enough business to support themselves. Some of these people are happy without substantial business and believe (often falsely) that their firm or partners will always take care of them. If you count yourself among this class, but would like to make progress on the road to self-sufficiency, consider the following steps:

1. **Stop believing that you are being too aggressive if you ask for business.** I once put together a panel of general counsels and senior in-house lawyers to discuss how they selected outside representation. The head counsel for a company with a multibillion dollar real estate portfolio actually said that she had never given any business to outside counsel who had not asked for it. Two others came close to saying the same thing. Even your closest friends will not consider whether or not you want business from them if you do not ask for it. This is particularly true if you seem very busy.
2. **For the right client, no piece of business is too small.** If you are offered work by a client you want, take it as an opportunity to prove yourself in hopes of getting larger matters in the future. All relationships must start somewhere. Existing companies are likely to already have lawyers that they use and like. In fact, you shouldn't be interested in a client that changes its lawyers easily.
3. **Don't assume you know the legal needs of either your current or potential clients.** It's important to ask questions. It is possible that something seemingly unrelated to the client's actual business could be the key to resolving their problems. You might be told that their now wealthy founder needs a new will or that his son is starting a small business and needs legal help. It is frequently more important to listen than to talk. You can't be an expert if you don't know what your client really needs.
4. **Your client's business is your business.** The very best lawyers often function as underpaid business people. Don't censor thoughts about your client's actual operations just because you are their lawyer. Very few consultants have anywhere near as much knowledge about your client's operations as you do. Share your ideas about the bigger business picture, not just the legal issue at hand. This sort of help often helps strengthen the lawyer-client relationship.
5. **Get to know people at social events.** You may not want to court business in a social setting, but you can collect a business card and call the person shortly thereafter. While you should call promptly, do so only after you have done as much homework about the person and their organization as possible. Call with some knowledge and ask for a

meeting, even if they have no legal work that need to be done. There is an awful lot of talent in the legal marketplace. If getting business was based solely on talent, clients would choose lawyers based upon exams. Frequently, however, they base such decisions on where their children go to school, who their spouse's bridge companions are or who can recommend a good white-water rafting spot.

6. **Attend your college alumni meetings.** Regardless of where you went to college, there are always potential clients among fellow graduates. Most of your college's alumni did not become lawyers. Many of your college's alumni did, however, enter business. People who attend alumni meetings are exactly the ones who care where someone went to college: otherwise they would not be there. This rule is even more true for those lawyers who went to smaller colleges or colleges in areas distant from where they now live. When a college's alumni are not ubiquitous (such as in the quintessential "college town"), people will quickly return phone calls from their fellow graduates.
7. **If you learn that a current client has sent business elsewhere, have the courage to ask why, and listen carefully to the answer.** Regardless of whether a relationship with a client can be made better, there are things that you can learn for the future. Sometimes the rejections will be personal. While that may hurt, it is important to know your weaknesses as well as your strong suits. If the client's discomfort is a matter of pure personality, there may be nothing you need to change. However, if the legal or communications skills of either you or your associates are lacking, it may be time for an overhaul.
8. **Connect your clients with business opportunities and people they may want to know.** Your clients are probably at least as busy as you are. They do not have time to know everybody. If you work in the business world, chances are that you know people who should know each other. Make it happen, and you will be appreciated. They may return the favor and introduce you to potential clients.
9. **It is all right to give some free legal advice...just not much.** Sometimes clients call with small questions or just need a little hand-holding. While indulging such requests can go too far, it has the potential to bond you with executives and in-house counsel in ways that delivery of the best briefs or documents never will. Your clients will remember your responsiveness when the next (hopefully larger) legal issue arises.
10. **Always thank your clients for the work they give you and never insult their other lawyers.** Even long-standing clients have other options. It is important that they do not feel taken for granted. If you have to deal with legal work done by others that you think you could have done better, just ask questions or say what you might have done differently. It is all right to say, "Was this contingency addressed?" It is all right to say, "I would have asked for more security for you." It is not all right to say that your competition did a bad job. Your client hired them and you should not attack your client's judgment.

Obtaining new clients and getting new work from old ones takes time. Fortunately, rainmaking often develops at an accelerating pace. With these ten simple rules, your legal rainmaking skills should enable you to control your own business life as much as possible.