

BY FELICE C. WAGNER

Investing in Relationships

For Alston & Bird's Pinney Allen, current clients are the best source of new business.

Business Development

We've heard it a million times—the best place to find new business is with your existing clients. Nonetheless, most lawyers and law firms spend the vast majority of their marketing time and money chasing down new clients. Pinney Allen and her firm, Alston & Bird, know better.

In this month's installment of our rainmaker series, you'll find out how Allen, who has spent her entire 23 years of practice at Alston & Bird, has developed a thriving transactional tax practice. She also chairs the firm's executive board.

Tell me about your first significant client.

My first really significant client was an existing client of the firm. The first really new matter from a totally new client was somebody with whom I had a working relationship through an existing client. We were hosting a marketing event, and I sent her an invitation. The invitation came back, so I tracked her down. She called back and said there was a matter for which she wanted to consider us. We ended up getting the project.

It was a mix of doing good work, developing relationships, and staying in touch. Of course, a lot of it is luck. But you can increase your chances of being lucky by doing the right things.

What's been your strategy for growing your practice?

Your best strategy is to always perform as well as you can. That goal is extremely important. Second, you need to be out there building your profile. Whether it's professional organizations, speaking, writing—all those things are important.

Of course, at different phases of your practice, you focus on different things. Ten years ago, my strategy was to stay visible and do the best work I could. I also focused on developing as many relationships as I could with existing clients and within my firm. Back then, I most often participated in bringing in new business as part of a team. As I've gotten further along, I have become the one doing the cold call or calling someone who would know me only from a meeting.

What do you say when you cold call?

I basically have an advertisement. I identify who I am, what firm I'm with, and what I specifically do. I then ask if I can have an opportunity to come talk with them.

How do people react?

Most of the time, positively. Sometimes you leave a message and they never call back. But frequently they do, and you have the meeting. Amazingly, they don't kill you. You survive. It's actually pretty exhilarating and not that difficult. Though in all honesty, being the chair of our partners committee this year has opened new doors for me.

How have you kept your practice going during economic downturns such as the one we are in now?

Business development is an investment process. The only good thing about a downturn is that you have the time to make the investment. I just spent a full day simply going through my Rolodex. I must have put in 25 calls and e-mails. Two days later, I've got eight meetings scheduled. Will anything come of that? I bet I get one or two pieces of business.

Where are the best places to meet potential clients?

Within existing clients. We have numerous examples where we've grown the relationship with an individual, and he or she moves on to another company. We not only keep the first client, but also get new business from the new company. It goes back to always doing your best and taking smart follow-up steps. If you do that, you'll get the opportunity.

You also meet potential clients through professional organizations whose members are not just lawyers. Within almost every company, there is a counterpart to outside counsel who may not be a lawyer. The key is to find out who they are and where to meet them.

How often is the client contact a former associate or partner at the firm?

It's one of the primary ways we have developed our client base. We work hard to ensure that when people leave, they leave happy. We have a great firm culture and are very proud to have been recognized by *Fortune* as one of the 100 best companies to work for. And we have an alumni program to stay in touch with former partners and associates. It's a great referral source.

Is marketing different for women?

Marketing is different for every person. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. In professional services, having a personal connection is important. There are going to be people who you're going to jibe well with and those you don't. Having said that, in 23 years of practice, the number of women to whom I market has increased dramatically. Does that make it easier? I think so. But ultimately, everybody has to become comfortable with their own style of marketing.

What techniques work best for you?

I try to consistently stay in touch. I also try to be thoughtful about the person, showing interest in them and in their career, not just their legal work. It's remembering to write a personal note. And it's doing it on a consistent basis. Sooner or later, you'll hit them on the right day. Even if you don't, your consistent contact will make them think of you when it is the opportune time. You've got to stay at it.

What doesn't work?

Not listening. You absolutely have to listen. If you're talking with a prospect about your capabilities in a certain area and they tell you they've got that covered, you will be wasting your time and theirs by continuing to discuss it. If you don't listen, you could easily miss clues about other needs. You need to recognize those clues and pick up on them.

Listening is also essential when you get the work. You need to listen to what they want and not tell them what they *should* want. You need to guide to some extent, but it's amazing how often lawyers don't listen to what the client really wants. You do that too often, and your relationship will end. If they want a bullet-point outline, do not send them a 50-page memo.

Many lawyers are uncomfortable with business development. How have you overcome that discomfort?

For years, I experienced incredible discomfort—and it still can be somewhat uncomfortable. One way to overcome it is to market with others. Frankly, in today's market, it would be foolish to go in alone to sell the complex legal services we provide. And it's more comfortable when somebody else is there with you. You don't need to worry about the awkward silences.

Another way to overcome it is to work with business development directors who can critique your presentation, or talk it over with another attorney.

You will also be far more comfortable if you think through what you want to accomplish. Set out two or



JUST DO IT: Pinney Allen says, "You have to carve out the time. You simply have to do it."

three points you want to talk about and be organized with relevant information about yourself, the firm, and the industry.

Where do you find the time to market?

You just do it, and that's it. You need to control your urge to do what's comfortable—to just do billable work. You have to carve out the time. You simply have to do it.

How has the firm facilitated the cross-selling of services to existing clients?

First, your compensation system must reward cross-selling. You see firms all the time where relationships with significant institutions never get out of a silo of skill sets. The client remains solely a tax client, for example, and never develops into more. It's a huge opportunity lost.

The firm culture must encourage and reward people—not just monetarily, but with recognition. The culture has to encourage teamwork and reward people for more than just the work they do.

In our annual evaluations, every partner has to submit a memo outlining their planned activities for the next year. If you are responsible for a particular client, you have to address the other services that you could sell to this client. It's very gratifying when the IP litigator writes, "I could sell state and local tax services." To make that happen, a firm

needs to ensure that its systems don't encourage the opposite behavior.

How do you move clients through the sales process? How do you get them from meeting you to giving you work?

I recently asked the in-house counsel of a very significant company, whom I had met at a conference, to get together to talk about her legal needs. The following Monday, she called with an opportunity. It's very rare that it happens that quickly.

Usually, it's a long process. You stay on top of the relationship. You follow the industry and that company in particular. You send an e-mail with an attached *Wall Street Journal* article that you know they've already read. You let them know that you're thinking about them. And periodically, you go back and ask again.

Once you get a small piece of business, your strategy changes. You make sure the work is done very well. Recently, a new client gave us work in a fairly small area. I just contacted them and asked to meet to get a report card—to find out what went well, what went wrong, and where we might expand the relationship. Once you get their work, you need to make sure—from their perspective, not yours—that you are doing the best you can.

What advice would you give to a young lawyer regarding business development?

First and foremost, be the absolute best lawyer you can be. Very few people can ultimately be effective marketers if they are not also very effective lawyers.

Young lawyers should always stay in touch with the people they've met. They may not be in a position to give you business today, but someday they may be. If they move to another company or get promoted, write a congratulatory note, take them out to lunch, stay in touch. If you do that, business will come naturally.

Finally, and maybe most important, find a mentor. Find somebody who will help you with the things about marketing that may not come naturally. It's shocking to me the number of things that people don't know. I have, of course, forgotten that I didn't know those things either. The only way you're going to really learn is to find a mentor.

Take the initiative. I'm flattered when somebody asks for my help with their development. Most people feel that way.

What do you know now that you wish you knew then?

That it doesn't hurt. I was as frightened of marketing as anybody could be. I now know not only that marketing doesn't hurt, but also that failure at it doesn't hurt either. You learn that it's not personal. I wish I had known how much fun it could be. Many of the people you get to work with are absolutely fascinating.

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