

Ask A Mentor: How Can New Partners Generate Business?

By **Christine Wong** (October 26, 2022, 4:26 PM EDT)

In this installment, Christine Wong, co-chair of the litigation department at Morrison Foerster LLP, discusses how a new partner can generate business and prioritize business development activities amid billable hour commitments.

Q: I'm an associate who has been elected to my firm's partnership, effective later this year. As a new partner, how should my business development efforts change, and what are some effective steps I can take to originate new business while juggling billable hours?

—Soon-to-be partner at BigLaw firm



Christine Wong

Thanks for your question, Soon-to-be, and congratulations on your election to the partnership!

In your new role as partner, business development is no longer a nice-to-have, it's a must. It will take time to find your cadence, and your business development efforts will be driven by several factors, including your firm's resources and your practice goals.

However, here are some golden rules that can help you prioritize business development.

Business development is cyclical, but planning is essential.

One important thing to remember is the amount of time you can dedicate to business development will be cyclical. Regardless of where your billable hours stand, you should always have a plan and do it consistently, even if the time you devote to execution varies.

Early on in your new role as partner, carve out some time to meet with your marketing team to create a strategic plan with actionable and measurable goals that you can check in on during regular meetings. With this plan, your marketing team can help you focus on the right set of activities to help get you where you'd like to go.

It's important to remember that originating new business should stay top of mind, even when you're in the middle of a big matter for a client. While business development can fall to the wayside, it's

important to plant seeds and create a runway for a new business pipeline before the existing matter concludes.

Having a plan in place outlines a distinct path forward when you may have extra time, and it can also provide clear actions and deliverables for you to chip away at when billables are very busy.

In addition to planning, ask if your business development or attorney development teams can provide training on presentation skills, network development and issues related to law firm economics.

It can also be helpful to determine which areas you excel at and focus on refining those skills. Your local American Bar Association chapter may also be a good resource to find these types of courses.

Success comes with practice; be aware of the areas you need to work on and prioritize your education.

Leverage existing relationships.

Most associates or counsel who have been elevated to partner already have a strong understanding that developing working relationships with their professional and personal networks is one of the cornerstones of business development.

When you are an associate or counsel, these efforts may involve using the high-profile experiences of your senior colleagues to facilitate introductions to an organization's C-suite or legal department, the inner circle of a high-net-worth individual or law firms that can serve as potential referral sources.

As a partner, your business development will become more focused on your own experience and why the client should specifically hire you to lead their outside legal team. But don't forget to team up with other partners, long-standing and newly elected, to see where your practices align and if you have client contacts or interests that you could share and jointly pitch.

You don't always have to introduce a new client to expand your business; new business often comes from doing quality work for existing clients.

Get to know a client's business and how they may need assistance elsewhere — even beyond your current matter and practice. It is best to try to look at things from the client's perspective and understand exactly what their goals are and learn their industry. Following a victory is the perfect time to introduce your fellow partners or other firm practices if they add value to your client.

Lastly, leverage your billable work to build and nurture relationships with co-counsel, vendors like auditors and forensic accountants, and even adversaries.

By maintaining a professional and collegial attitude, even in trying times, it is possible to make an adversary think of you to represent the board of directors or individual witnesses the next time they are conducting an internal investigation on behalf of a company.

Work on personal branding and thought leadership.

New business most likely will be generated through pitching, requests for proposal, etc., but don't neglect building your personal brand. Sometimes called the soft sell, media relations and thought leadership for you and your practice will contribute to your business development goals and get you on

new clients' radar. Consider what you want to be known for and use that to introduce yourself rather than merely using your partner title.

Any time you work on something nonbillable — a client alert or a presentation for a conference — think of how you can repackage it for a new audience, news hook or thought leadership piece.

Add your media relations team to your regular marketing meetings to give them a window into your work. They will be able to suggest opportunities to meet with reporters or write articles in trade publications directed at the niche you may be targeting.

Another way to brand yourself is through social media channels like LinkedIn or Twitter, which offer an unintrusive way to engage with potential clients. They can also help you build a portfolio of work that you can use when courting new clients, maximize your search engine optimization and align your brand with the content you publish.

It's a marathon, not a sprint.

While business development is important to your new role as a partner, law careers are long and winding roads. Remember that it will take time to finesse your business development skills and discover what you enjoy and what works for you so that it is sustainable.

You're new to your role, and the expectations you set should be attainable — your book of business is not going to be as large as a 20-year veteran rainmaker's.

It takes time to build that book of business, but you're on the right track, Soon-to-be, because you're already thinking and planning the key indicators to develop your flourishing career as a partner.

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