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Forming the roots of a successful practice

Countless articles and Continuing Legal Education seminars teach us about marketing.

But no matter how many articles we read or seminars we attend, it is often difficult for young attorneys to make the mental shift toward marketing our services. We trained to be lawyers, not salesmen.

Unfortunately, much of the advice we receive, while good, is overarching or theoretical in nature. For most of us, the difficulty comes with making that first sale — our first client.

Whether you're a sole practitioner or a big firm associate, opening that first client file is the linchpin to your book of business. This column is directed at young attorneys looking to get over that proverbial hump.

Law school doesn't prepare us for it — and that's not a criticism of the curriculum. Law school teaches us to think like lawyers, not like salesmen. Marketing is more appropriately an in-service skill developed over time. After all, in order to market our skills, we must develop them to the point where someone would pay for them.

However, that does not mean that the two cannot grow alongside one another. You may not be prepared to handle everything that comes your way, but you can (perhaps with a little bit of help) handle much of it. Once you understand and believe that, you are well on your way to

building "your" practice.

I recall as a student and a young attorney receiving a goodly amount of advice on how not to give advice. You might recall the warnings to defer legal questions from party-goers and family members for fear of creating uncomfortable situations and unintended attorney-client relationships. While there are certainly some concerns to be aware of, I think this is generally poor advice for the young attorney looking to build a practice.

You should welcome legal matters with open arms — you're an attorney, after all. You shouldn't shy away from the attorney-client relationship; you should seek to close it. Set up a follow-up meeting or phone call to discuss the legal issue. That will give you more time to research the topic (if you're unfamiliar) or get help with the issue (if you have friends or colleagues who can assist). Some of my best clients are family members and people I met at social gatherings.

These are the roots of your network. The work you do for these contacts will spread to their contacts. Referrals and growth begin here. These are the seeds of your network.

The positives of taking on these matters far outweigh the negatives. Family and friends ask you for advice because they trust you with something that is likely very important in their lives.

I don't know much about cars, so when I bring my car to a

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mechanic, he could tell me that numerous things need repair and I wouldn't know any better. In those situations, trust is hard to come by unless you know the mechanic or have a personal connection (such as a reference).

The same goes for legal advice. In one of my previous columns, I explained how people rely on us to explain the unknown. People pay us for trusted advice and a head start on that trust (our current relationships) goes a long way for the client and the attorney.

More matters lead to more experience. You may be forced out of your comfort zone and into

the unknown. While you may have some insecurities and reservations at the outset of a matter, you can fall back on one of the most important skills you learned in law school — resourcefulness. Learn how to embody it. Read treatises, secondary sources and ask colleagues for help.

If you are committed to servicing your client in the best way possible, you will. Learning curves will be there and you may not be as profitable as you'd like to be early on (don't charge your client to learn). Your processes and skills will evolve over time.

Whether it's your first client or your last, client satisfaction should be your ultimate goal. There is no better referral source than a satisfied client.

When I think about my own career growth and when I discuss business development with younger attorneys, I find that confidence is the key in taking those first steps toward building a practice. In almost every case, you are not alone. The feeling of insecurity is helpful in that it forces us to prepare and learn more, but it can and must be overcome in order to get clients. The more you do it, the easier it will become.

Hopefully, you'll never quite recall when you overcame those feelings. Your skills and your book of business can and should grow as a single organism. If all goes well, you'll look back and wonder what you were worried about.