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Coffee cakes, hams help build business

In February 1995, after six years working as an associate in a boutique business and banking law firm, I resigned to start my own practice on the second floor of my house in Ravenswood. I had no clients, no real office and absolutely no idea how I would develop business. My parents thought I was crazy to abandon a secure job at a good firm where I was sure to become a partner.

Why did I do it? I suppose the most honest explanation is that I wanted to see if I could make it on my own. I wondered whether I could take what I had learned over my first six years as a lawyer and convert that into a viable law practice. Frankly, I had no idea whether I could, and since I had virtually no clients, the odds were stacked against me. In addition, the firm I resigned from had spent no time or resources teaching me how to market clients for business. I did not know the first thing about the business of law or how to find clients. I had never had to worry about that before. All I had had to do was work on files handed to me by other lawyers in my firm.

In early 1994, a year before I went out on my own, I saw Steven Spielberg's remarkable movie "Schindler's List." The movie had a profound impact on me in many ways and, believe it or not, I would soon model my initial forays into marketing on the main protagonist, Oskar Schindler. After seeing the movie, I often recalled how Schindler ingratiated himself to those in the German military responsible for awarding military contracts. He would send them cigarettes, chocolate, wine, cheeses, sausages and other tasty treats. It did not matter that Schindler was unknown at first by many of the recipients of his generosity. What mattered was that they truly appreciated the treats they received. So much so that they eventually started to send him business.

Between February and June 1995, I must have personally delivered more than 50 \$6 coffee cakes to anyone I thought might be able to send me business or connect me to someone who could. I would drive to Wheaton, Naperville, Joliet, Waukegan and many other suburbs to simply drop off the cakes at prospective clients. Often, I would arrive unannounced and simply staple my business card to the coffee cake packaging. If permitted, I would spend a minute with a bank executive or other businessperson and say that I was a business and banking lawyer who was — GULP — looking for business opportunities.

On my drive back home I would fight the

GONE FISHIN'

**JOSHUA S.
HYMAN**



Joshua S. Hyman is a shareholder with Chuhak & Tecson P.C. and co-chairs the firm's 18-attorney bank practice group. Since 1989, Josh has provided banks and commercial finance companies, including both national institutions and locally based lenders, with results-oriented, efficient and highly responsive representation in a broad range of matters, including structuring loan transactions, negotiating, and drafting loan and collateral documents. He also advises lenders and other secured creditors in bankruptcy proceedings, workouts and other creditors' rights matters, as well as representing them in lender liability suits.

temptation to feel embarrassed or foolish for having spent three hours that morning delivering a \$6 coffee cake to a business that did not know me. One morning, while driving home from a drop-off, I got a call from a bank president. He was so impressed with my ingenuity and guile that he asked me to come to the bank the next week to discuss doing work for that institution. I continue to work with that bank today, almost 17 years later.

Eventually, I graduated from coffee cake delivery boy to personally delivering honey-baked hams or turkeys with all the fixings for 20 to 30 employees. Of course, lunch for a crowd was more expensive and required a little more time and planning, but it was all so

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simple and well-received. I would pick up food from Dominick's and set it up in the kitchen of the designated business. After spending 10 minutes watching the staff line up to serve themselves at the lunch hour, I would quietly leave the premises. The staff expressed their appreciation to the company's management who, in turn, would call and thank me for my time and thoughtfulness.

It seemed like the more food I delivered, the more work I received. To me, there is nothing quite like the personal touch of dropping off a tasty treat to get an existing or potential client to take notice. It is these little inexpensive moments of goodwill that can help create the foundation for long-standing business relationships.

Over the years, the amount of time, money and energy I dedicated to marketing with each client or prospective client increased. Instead of dropping off food, I followed the time-honored tradition of hosting clients and prospects at sporting events. Along the way it occurred to me that these business people might prefer to spend that same after-hours time with family or friends, instead of with me. Therefore, I rarely take clients to sporting events anymore. Rather, I acknowledge to them how precious their personal time is and suggest that they might enjoy spending their time at the game with their spouse or children, instead of with another attorney trying to hit them up for business.

I have found that marketing this way further endears me to a client or prospect in a way that is much more personal and lasting than if I had spent three hours next to them at a game. I often get a thank you text or email during the game with an attached picture of them with their spouse, child or friend. I then follow up and take the client/prospect to breakfast or lunch during business hours, often hearing in their words and tone their appreciation for sending them to the game. Over the years, the more I would hear "my wife and I had a great time at the game," the more business I would get.

I continue to focus my marketing efforts on how best to personalize myself to clients. Yes, it takes time, energy and effort and requires being away from the office and doing nothing that is billable. But when I look back on those first days in February 1995, I am sure I did the right thing. Indeed, today I represent 80 banks and have built an 18-attorney bank practice group. Thank you, Oskar Schindler.