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The Power of the Business Plan

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A powerful business plan can change your life, especially if you are in a moment of transition with your practice. Any lawyer who wants to have his or her own clients — or more of their own clients — should outline their plan to obtain that goal. Arguably, the most critical juncture is when you are looking at other firms in hopes of making a lateral move, but there are no bad times to put together an action plan for expanding your practice, even if you never plan to change firms during your career.

WHY A BUSINESS PLAN IS IMPORTANT

1. A good business plan leads to good job offers. If you are exploring a lateral move, a business plan helps firms see that you are mindful of the business of law. It also allows them to see who your contacts are and compare them with their platform. Perhaps one

of the reasons that you are exploring a move is that you are currently conflicted from doing work for a strong contact. If you lay that out early in a business plan, you may find it helpful to determine if the other firm is a better platform for that work. Often firms are interested in candidates who have additional touch points to the same clients as well as new contacts that might grow the client base. Further, the way you describe your practice and expertise allows a firm to determine if they can sell what you are offering to their existing clients. This is a very persuasive document even for an attorney who has a strong client following and a portable book of business.

2. It helps you determine your value in the marketplace. Right now, many lawyers are struggling with how to differentiate themselves in the market. Do you specialize in an area that is less active than it was years ago, like intellectual property litigation? Are you hoping to take your very strong practice to a better platform where you can grow your client

relationships? What are the cases or deals you have worked on that make you attractive to potential future clients? Figuring out how to leverage what you have done in a way that is attractive to clients is critical to reaching your goals. Articulating this in a business plan helps you explain this later to potential clients and during cross-selling opportunities within your own firm.

3. It helps you determine who you know. Forcing yourself to sit down and write a list of your business contacts is painful, but fruitful. Go through your e-mail contacts; go through your LinkedIn connections; dig through your Facebook friends. There are probably a lot more opportunities there than you thought. Pay particular attention to clients you worked with who have changed companies. It might also make you realize that you need to be more thoughtful and organized about keeping in touch with existing relationships and capturing the information of the client contacts as deals end or cases conclude. Include anyone on the list who you think would meet with you, not

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just those that you think would definitely hand you work.

4. It gives you a roadmap for success. Outlining your value to the market and identifying potential contacts for your services is the hard part of business development. Do it all at once, break it into segments or use it as a to-do list. However you do it, you will have made a plan to follow that includes milestones toward your goals — whether they are defined or uncertain. If you are making a lateral move, it gives you direction when starting at the new firm.

5. It gives you content to cut and paste into pitch materials. Well, not quite cut and paste. However, if you do a good job describing your value to the market and how your experience is relevant to what clients are facing, you have a pretty strong head start at marketing yourself to a new firm and new clients.

HOW TO WRITE A STRONG BUSINESS PLAN

A good business plan is made up of several key parts: an executive summary describing your background, qualifications and goals; an analysis of the market; a description of your business; a list of your current contacts and prospect target; and a plan of action.

Step 1: Describe Yourself and the Market

This portion is particularly useful if the purpose of the business plan is part of a lateral search. You need to have an understanding of yourself, your practice area

and your goals before describing where you want to go.

Step 2: Describe How Your Experience Serves the Market

I have seen this successfully done in a variety of ways: case by case, by category, by client or chronological. What you want to describe here is how your experience in the past would be helpful to what your clients are facing now and in the future.

Step 3: Who You Know

I really like to see this in a chart: contact name, contact company, source of the relationship and status of business relationship. This is where your clients are differentiated from the GC you sit next to at your kids' soccer games. Both are rightly on the list, but both will receive different treatment from you over the year. Building this list will also give you an opportunity to identify prospects.

Step 4: How You Will Act on It

Are you planning on speaking at a convention where these contacts will be? Do you plan to reach out to each of these contacts individually and invite them to lunch? Are you planning a CLE event where you will invite some of these people? Lay it out, and make sure that all the people on the list are contacted through at least one of the methods.

CONCLUSION

As you write your business plan, you want to make sure you are thinking through important issues and setting goals for yourself and your business. The business plan

should show where you are starting, where you are going and how you will get there. Ultimately, your plan is a guide; it's not set in stone and can be changed as your goals change. Reassess and re-evaluate it as time passes and use it to seize unexpected opportunities. Once you put together a strong plan, you can update it each year and will be able to identify what marketing and business prospecting is working and what time should be allocated to different tasks. Like anything else, time spent planning will save time in execution.



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