

Business development deciphered

Karen B. Kahn and John E. Mitchell, principals of KM Advisors LLC, answer the five questions female lawyers frequently ask about business development in the legal sphere.

Money is power. Or at the very least, money is the source of power and influence in most law firms. This is a hard concept for many female lawyers to embrace. You want power to come from good intentions, hard work, loyalty and fantastic ideas. Selling yourself feels like selling your soul. The reality is that the amount of business you generate frequently affects your status, leadership positions and, of course, your compensation level.

The National Association of Women Lawyers' (NAWL) November 2008 report *The Third Annual National Survey On Retention And Promotion Of Women In Law Firms* reveals an alarming difference between the amount of power and money men and women have in large law firms: "At every stage of practice, men out-earn women lawyers... Male equity partners earn on average over \$87,000 a year more than female equity partners. In 99 per cent of large firms, the most highly compensated partner is a man."

The report also notes that women have no presence at all on 15 per cent of the nation's largest firms' governing committees. As long as the amount of business a lawyer generates corresponds to her clout in the firm, women will inhabit the lower tiers of the organisational hierarchy.

Through many years of talking to women about business development, we have uncovered a major impediment to women generating business: they think they need to pursue new business the same way men do. Unfortunately, these male behaviours are uncomfortable for many women. They feel lost in this domain because there are no well-known 'women-centric' models for cultivating business. A woman succeeds in business development when it is done her way by leveraging her strengths and her approaches to relationships.

In conversations with female lawyers, questions about rainmaking arise over and over again. The answers to the top five questions can shed light on a woman's ways of thinking about business development and making rain her way.

1. Why is business development important?

Success in large law firms requires knowledge of the law as well as knowledge about the business of law. Law firms, like all businesses, need profits to thrive. Therefore, the people who significantly contribute to the bottom line possess the greatest amount of power to determine the direction of their careers. Developing the ability to attract and retain clients is the key to success. You will rarely be queried about where, when and with whom you work when you have significant business under your control. This skill also gets you a seat at the table where the direction and culture of the firm are determined.

The belief that being a great lawyer is only about substantive law has probably contributed more to the disparity between male and female lawyers in law firms than any other single factor. The ability to develop business, more than the ability to practice law, predicts success in most large law firms. This reality does not have to be a deal breaker; there are many ways to develop business. You don't need to obtain clients by asking everyone in earshot for business. You don't need to join every not-

for-profit and civic board. You don't need to wine and dine your prospective clients at football games and golf tournaments. You can do it YOUR way and you can have fun doing it. Strong relationships are the gateway to developing business and creating great relationships is what most women do naturally.

2. I don't know anybody who can afford to buy my services. What do I do?

The possibilities are greater than you think. Don't think about 'selling' legal services the same way store owners sell their wares. Change your 'sell' mentality to one that emphasises helping people professionally and personally. You will develop the deep, trusting relationships that people look for when they need a lawyer. Develop a keen awareness of people's needs. Ask about their challenges and opportunities wherever you happen to be. Help them overcome their challenges and share ideas about ways to take advantage of their opportunities. Relationships based on an authentic desire to help are gratifying. Let others know how they can help you too. This fosters mutuality; the foundation of strong and lasting relationships.

3. I know that I am supposed to talk to my friends about business, but I am afraid that if I do I will seem pushy and uncaring. How do I talk about business without annoying my friends?

First, don't talk about your business. Talk about their businesses. Your working friends likely spend more time at work each week than they do with family and friends. How can you be a good friend if you don't know about, and talk about, the activities that typically consume your friends?

The feeling that you are violating a friendship typically comes when, having rarely talked about work, you suddenly attempt to 'sell' something that your friend has never mentioned she needs. Discussions about work and how friends can help each other succeed can be very gratifying. It is ironic that women are open with their friends about the most intimate parts of their life, yet they rarely talk about the work activities that often occupy a major portion of their day. Introducing friends to people who may be able to help them in business adds a valuable component to the relationship. Learn about your friends' professional goals and aspirations. Share information about ideal clients and personal definitions of success, and you can expand the scope of your friendships and experience the fun and joy of prospering together.

4. How do I get into the 'old boys club'?

The 'old boys club' is an informal network of men who help each other personally and professionally by making valuable introductions and exchanging important information. Its strength comes from familiarity bred among similar individuals. Women can be, and are, in strong, productive, mutually-beneficial relationships with men, but cannot be a part of their gender-based network. A networking group made up of women helping each other both inside and outside of the firm can be just as influential as the male counterpart. Indeed, the growing number of female general counsels, managing partners, rainmakers and C-level executives points to the great potential gain from women working collaboratively.

Gather women together frequently for lunch or a fun event. Introduce conversation topics that will get women talking about their work and personal needs. Be attentive to ways you can help other women, such as by making introductions, sharing information and finding ways to promote talented women. By forging, expanding and sustaining connections and interconnections with other women, you will create a vital network of women who can help each other succeed. You will also have great fun

meeting new women and exploring ways to help each other. Don't be threatened by the existence of an 'old boys' network; you can leverage informal networks just as easily as men do.

5. How do I make sure that men do not misconstrue my invitation to a business lunch as a personal gesture?

You need to develop strong relationships with both women and men to successfully develop business. To escape ambiguity and uncomfortable conversations, clearly communicate your purpose and be deliberately professional in your behaviour. For example, all verbal and non-verbal communication must stay focused on business and facts until you are certain that the relationship has been accepted as professional.

Dress conservatively and professionally.

While speaking, stay focused on the topic, indicate with direct eye-contact and occasional nods that you are tracking what is being said. Stick to the business agenda. If you are concerned that the purpose of the meeting may be misconstrued, bring another person along to communicate that there is no such agenda. In order to casually expand discussion beyond work, ask about his spouse, recreation and family activities. Minimise the personal information that you share. Finally, if you issue the invitation, then you pay the bill.

Become an assertive business developer. Take the initiative and responsibility to drive your definition of success. Seek guidance from mentors, coaches and successful rainmakers. Experiment with various approaches and skills to uncover your way of attracting and working with new clients.

Firms also have a responsibility in this domain. They must work continually to create environments where women can succeed and assess all systems related to business generation. Women and men need to have equal access to assignments, key client relationships and training opportunities. Through earnest efforts and investments in time and resources on the part of women, men and firms, the business development agenda will move forward and the success gap that currently separates men and women in large law firms will progressively shrink.

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