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Building a Practice: How to Connect with Prospective Clients

By Carol Schiro Greenwald

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Last month we discussed knowledge-sharing visibility activities, including writing articles, speaking at relevant events, participating in online Listservs and group discussions, and sponsoring events. This month we will consider some marketing tactics that make you easier to find, including your website's content, niche advertising opportunities, and networking conversations with prospects.

Yes, we're talking about the S-word: Selling.

The image is a promotional banner for mycase. It features a teal background with white clouds. On the left, the mycase logo is displayed. In the center, the text reads "Trusted by thousands of attorneys" in a large, bold, white font, followed by "MEMBERS RECEIVE 20% OFF" in a smaller white font. Below this is an orange button with the text "Start Your Free Trial" in white. On the right side, the ABA logo is shown, with the text "AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION™" underneath it.

Selling, like personal networking, doesn't need to be tawdry, sleazy, or embarrassing. It can be as natural as sharing your enthusiasm for an idea, product, or service with people who may need it, immediately or at some time in the future.

Successful professionals practice a version of selling called "consultative selling," which focuses first on establishing a strong relationship with a potential buyer, and, second, on selling this potential buyer a specific service. Understood this way, selling is just one part of networking relationships.

In consultative selling, the person with the solution steers the person with the problem toward an appropriate resolution. As the person with solutions, your role is to educate prospects by asking thought-provoking questions that help them identify their pain points and move toward appropriate buying decisions.

Prospects' Search Behavior

In the "old days," people asked their best friends or other professionals for referrals to a lawyer. Then they selected one to interview and usually signed on. Today, they are as likely to search online for a lawyer. According to Clio's [Legal Trends Report, 2019](#), "59 percent of clients sought a referral from someone they know or have been in contact with, but 57 percent searched on their own through some other means—and 16 percent did both."

Forty-four percent think it is important to talk to more than one lawyer, but 42 percent would choose the first one they speak to if they like the person. All of them are looking for a lawyer they feel is right for them. Younger consumers are more likely to search independently.

According to the Clio Report, "younger generations are more likely to care about:

- a lawyer's website (49% of Gen Z and 48% of Millennials compared to 34% of Gen X and 21% of Boomers)
- a firm's brand and image (45% of Gen Z and 36% of Millennials compared to 28% of Gen X and 19% of Boomers)
- a firm's online reviews (46% of Gen Z and 53% of Millennials compared to 39% of Gen X and 25% of Boomers)."

Further, "[y]ounger generations are less likely to value referrals from lawyers (47% of Gen Z and 46% of Millennials compared to 56% of Gen X and 60% of Boomers)." So, if your client base trends younger, you will want to polish your online brand and image. If you work primarily with older people, you will also want to cultivate referrers since Gen X and Boomers are more likely to begin their quest by seeking referrals.

Your Brand, Your Image

When people look for a lawyer, the first sense they get about you is your brand. Everyone has a brand, but not everyone pays attention to it. Your brand is an essential part of your professional image, which is an essential part of your ability to attract clients.

Your brand is your promise that you will behave in certain ways and provide certain outcomes. It is built from thousands of touchpoints between you and others. It is an emotional bridge to others, a fragile promise, easy to destroy with one miscommunication.

Your image communicates your brand. How you walk and talk represents your brand in action. It is the basis for others' perception of you. It is the key to consultative selling success because:

- 93 percent of communication is visual and vocal, not verbal.
- It takes three seconds to make a first impression.

You use your marketing tools to introduce your brand to prospects so they know what to expect when they meet you, and to reinforce their in-person impression of you should they check you out after a meeting. Let's look at some ways to do this.

Websites

Your website should be your online brand. You should use color, fonts, and language to convey the personality of your practice.

- Are you an "outside-the-box" thinker? Use bright colors and large, clear fonts to corroborate your image.
- Are you a conservative, effective corporate negotiator? Try soothing colors that imply "trust," such as blue and green, along with a traditional font.

In addition, pay attention to the message sent by the way the site works.

- Do you reference COVID-19 and how your firm is handling the situation? This is an important connection to make so that visitors see the human side of you and understand what you are doing to meet the pandemic's challenges.
- Is it easy to connect with you from the site? Is your phone number visible on every page? Do you have a chat feature? Can prospective clients fill out a contact form to send you a specific question?
- Can a visitor watch a video to assess you "live"?
- Can a visitor move seamlessly with a quick click from a general point to specifics in your bio, case studies, etc.?
- Do you offer practice examples that speak to your specific audience?

- Do you minimize the use of jargon?
- Will you keep prospective clients and their confidences safe? This begins by making sure you have a secure website, as evidenced by your URL: If it starts “https” rather than “http”, visitors can see that your site is secure.

The sum of these small changes will be a site that speaks to your target audience and reinforces your in-person professional message.

Niche Advertising

In addition to general-purpose advertising on Facebook or in magazines, there is niche advertising aimed at your specific audience. You find these opportunities in event journal advertisements, as a sponsor of meetings your prospect attends, and in local or audience-specific magazines, newsletters, blogs, and podcasts.

Talk to your clients to find out what they read, watch, and listen to, and then see if these venues provide opportunities to advertise. Usually, such placements cost less than mainstream advertising commitments, and they can be very effective in communicating your brand to your audience.

Consultative Selling Conversations

Just like the thought-leadership opportunities we discussed in the [August issue of GPSolo eReport](#), websites and advertising represent you in writing. When it's time to come out from behind the written word, what should you say? How should you say it?

Your goal is to establish rapport, the basis for a long-term relationship that will include more work, but also referrals, resources, and, perhaps, friendship. To do this, you need to capture the prospect's interest and desire, taking her on an emotional journey so she bonds with you and is willing to accept your solutions.

Before the conversation begins, research the prospect and her world. Understand the opportunities and the threats for the person, her company, her family, and any other players. Be conversant with the trends that are important in creating the situation the prospect is in, and the trends that will impact the success of your solution.

You need to be strategic in terms of the questions you ask, the way you show your value by tying your skills and experience to the prospect's, and the way you create rapport by focusing the conversation on her. You need to be:

- Patient
- Curious
- Knowledgeable
- Personable
- A good listener

Remember that this immediate sale is only one phase of the whole relationship. As you move the conversation with prospects forward over many meetings, remember a few key phrases:

- “Tell me more”: an invitation to probe deeper and learn more about them and their perceptions.
- “I'm curious”: a way to get to what's unspoken, to tie the rational facts to their emotional context.

- “So what?”: a way to move to the decision phase by asking, “So what happens if you do nothing? What happens? Who gets hurt? Who or what survives?”

The “close” becomes the continuation of these conversations where you offer next steps and ask how the prospect wants to proceed.

Summary

Selling is one of many networking goals. Networking is the process for creating and maintaining relationships with people you can help, who can also help you. Sales come into the picture when the person discusses a problem that you could help them resolve.

Use your website and targeted advertising to project a consistent message to the people who could use your services. Engage these prospects by showing empathy as well as expertise. Create a picture of yourself as the right person to help them resolve their issues. View the process as one of discovery and enjoy the ride.

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Authors



Carol Schiro Greenwald

Carol Schiro Greenwald, Ph.D. (carol@csgmarketingpartners.com, 914/834-9320),

is a marketing and management strategist, trainer and coach. She works with professionals and professional service firms to structure and implement growth programs that are targeted, strategic and practical. This article is drawn from material in her latest book, *Strategic Networking for Introverts, Extroverts and Everyone in Between* (ABA, 2019).

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