

JANUARY 2014

Professional resolutions for business-development success in 2014

Simple steps you can take for improved results in marketing your practice

By Traci Stuart



With the holiday hustle behind you and a new calendar on your desk, there is no better time to craft a list of professional business development resolutions for the year ahead. Having a more dynamic and successful year is not a piece of fruitcake, but with advance planning, dedication and consistent execution, increasing your network and, ultimately, your business is an attainable and measurable goal. To ease into the process, following are some daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly steps to consider (and their corresponding time commitments) for super-charging your business-development efforts in 2014.

Annual preparation

In considering your 2014 business development resolutions, start with an honest self-evaluation. This exercise requires undivided attention and some serious introspection – neither of which are common in today's competitive legal market. Consider purposely coming in a half-hour to an hour before you normally do, closing the door and focusing.

This self-evaluation can serve as a central source from which you plan and operate, provided you put real effort into it. How do you rate your 2013 marketing efforts? Were there particular activities or behaviors that generated a positive response from clients and potential clients? Were there missed opportunities? What sort of marketing activities are competitors undertaking, and would they work for you and your firm? Do you actually like (and are you good at) speaking, writing articles, networking, etc.? Are their personal and/or family commitments that must be taken into consideration in the year ahead?

As with any New Year's resolution, the key to success is developing clear and realistic goals that you can and will maintain in September with the same vigor as when you started in January or February.

Daily

•***Read the news (15 minutes)*** – Passionate and dedicated attorneys often get absorbed in their work and clients; however, what may be a benefit to the matter at-hand often means day-to-day connections with other potential clients and referral sources take a back seat. Be sure you're taking in news of the "outside" world every day. By doing so, it's possible to identify trends that may be of interest to clients or, better yet, may drive your next big matter(s) through the door. You'll also have an educated perspective on the emerging issues to share at that networking cocktail party or over lunch with that referral source. Taking in a daily dose of news affords great fluency in the topics of the day (both banal and weighty) and helps you connect with the world

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outside your immediate case and client load. By taking just a few minutes to go through the news, online or in print, you will find more to talk about with others, as well as trends and issues that connect naturally to your business. You can find the time to do this during your commute or over morning coffee.

•***Follow the filings (5 minutes)*** – As important as it is to follow the non-legal trends and issues outside the firm, it is also helpful to be aware of new case filings – whether by competitors, related to your own pending matters or involving practice-related themes. If you spot an influx of cases involving a certain type of law or client, you can use this information when looking to expand your own offerings or when thinking about areas to market. This is an easy task, thanks to the numerous newsletters and feeds offered by legal publications. Sign up for one or all and quickly scan daily.

Weekly

•***Make one call/e-mail (5-15 minutes)*** – In marketing and branding circles, professionals claim it takes seven to 10 "touches" or encounters with an individual or brand before the average consumer is familiar enough to make a purchase decision. This is a good rule to keep in mind for your networking. Resolve to get in the habit of making at least one direct "touch" a week. Reach out to that potential referral source you met last week and arrange a lunch date. Check in with a professional contact who may be attending this week's bar association mixer. Send an article you read that may be of interest to a former client. If you make just one "touch" per week, you'll have made more than 50 by year's end – and that's 50 steps toward landing quality clients and referrals.

•***Acknowledge milestones (15 minutes)*** – Take every opportunity to touch base with the individuals in your network. This might be combined with your weekly "one call/e-mail." Make note of birthdays, anniversaries, marriages and births, career accomplishments, etc. Social networking sites, like LinkedIn and Facebook, make keeping track of important dates relatively easy – and to make it even easier, consider taking down vitals upon client intake, ensuring you always have a running list of "basic" information. Use the notes section in Outlook to document details and set "reminders" so that milestones are acknowledged in a timely manner.

• ***"Do lunch" (60-90 minutes)*** – A meal is an easy, time-restricted opportunity for two individuals to learn about each other professionally and connect on a personal level. The more knowledge your referral sources have about who you are and your practice, the more these individuals can help you achieve your business-development goals – whether they involve identifying possible client referrals in a new area or keeping you top of mind for participation on a speaking panel. Of course, relationships are generally give and take, so it's critical to listen for opportunities to help your contacts further their careers, as well.

•***Get "social" (30-60 minutes)*** – Do you have a LinkedIn profile? Do you have a firm Facebook page? How about Google+? AVVO? It's one thing to answer "yes" to these questions, but now ask, "Am I attending to my online profile?" If you're going to have a presence on the various social networking and media sites, curating your online "brand" is critical. You don't have to be particularly active in posting every day or week, but you do need to ensure that the image these sites portray is what you'd like clients to see. Have you plugged your own name and/or firm name into a Google search bar to see what appears? How about Yahoo? Bing? Is there a professional (and current) photo on your various profiles so that if one looks you up in advance of a meeting they will be able to recognize you? Have you fully completed the biographic information fields so your experience and expertise is clear? Online profile maintenance is a requirement of 21st-century business. Make sure for 2014 that your Internet image is up to date.

Monthly

•***Engage beyond work (2-4 hours)*** – It is often said, but rarely deeply considered, that relationships are the essential elements in building and maintaining business. Plaintiffs' attorneys often consider their business to be a series of "one off" matters, but happy former clients may be some of your best referral sources. They can provide fodder for your Website in the form of testimonials; they can offer other potential clients a reference and instill comfort around your ability to deliver service; they can back up your nomination claims when being considered for professional listings (e.g. "Best Lawyers") and awards ("Top Plaintiffs' Lawyers for 2013" in your region). People like supporting and doing business with people they personally understand and enjoy. Be that lawyer! Consider volunteering side-by-side with your clients and referral sources. Throw a party to celebrate a firm milestone. Buy tickets to the latest in-town performance and take a professional friend or two as your guests. Book that long overdue lunch or dinner (see "Do Lunch").

•***Get involved (1-3 hours)*** – Consider getting involved in a community or professional organization or participating on a corporate or non-profit board of directors with the potential to expose you and your work and communication style to a new audience that may be inclined to refer business your way. The number of worthy organizations is nearly limitless, so it's important to take a look at your practice niche and identify involvement opportunities that "fit." For example, a firm or attorney that handles a high concentration of matters involving bike accidents might opt to volunteer with a cycling coalition or local traffic safety board. Beyond the business-development possibilities, find an organization with a membership you enjoy and a cause or goal that is near and dear to you. This will help ensure that you put your best foot forward and stick out the involvement long enough to reap the network-enhancing benefits.

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Quarterly

•Update your bio (15-30 minutes) – Shut the door, close Outlook and really consider whether or not your firm bio says what you want it to say about you and your practice. Study it to ensure it contains all your salient achievements (significant matters, articles written, speaking engagements, community involvement). If you are stuck, and since your door is already closed, go through the exercise of introducing yourself to a potential client out loud. If your bio isn't conveying *that* message, then change it so it does. The most visited section of a firm's Website is the bios. In a technology-centric world where people like to have information at their fingertips, potential clients are much more likely to look you up on the Website than to rely on any new materials you may send. Your Web bio is not a backup; it is the main source of information and should be updated as such.

•Attend one industry group event (1-2 hours) – Beyond CLE requirements, identify and go to a presentation by either a local bar association group or an industry trade group. Take your business card with you and try to make at least three connections. (One trick, for those who tend to be a little shy, is to take three business cards to the event and *do not leave* until they've been given out.) Network naturally and engage. Strike up a conversation when waiting in line for a drink. Approach the speaker after the presentation and share your thoughts on the topic. Everyone at the event shares at least one interest with you, and these events are a great opportunity to expand both your educational and personal interests.

•Write a bylined article (3-5 hours) – There are digital and print publications for almost every interest and industry, as well as a robust line-up of legal trade publications locally and nationally – and most list their editorial staffs online. Pick a publication, blog or Website that reaches your potential clients or referral sources, and identify a niche topic in your area of practice that you can address from an educational perspective. From there, let the editor know you'd love to write a bylined article. These educational (not sales) pieces are typically around 1,200 words (2,500 for a professional journal such as Plaintiff magazine) and include your photo and contact information as the author. Further, it's an opportunity to highlight your thought leadership on a particular topic.

Publishing a bylined article will bolster your bio and provide a quality collateral piece to send to clients and/or referral sources or to hand out/leave behind when the opportunity arises (e.g., after a speaking engagement). You may find that you receive calls from reporters who'd like commentary on the demonstrated area of expertise or calls from peers looking to round out a speaking panel or, better yet, calls from potential clients. An article is also another opportunity for an additional "touch." If you wrote a piece that you think a contact may find relevant, send them a copy for their reference. They will be happy to receive the information and it will help to strengthen their opinion of you and your expertise.

When looking to the year ahead, remember that making a few strategic resolutions and devoting some consistent time and energy to them will deliver a solid return on your investment by year's end. These tasks might seem daunting when looking at them all at once, but try to take them one day/week/month/quarter at a time and the workload becomes manageable. Once you start to see results, the momentum will carry you forward. The goal of all of these exercises is simple – increase your business development efforts to maintain and develop more business in the new year – a resolution on which we can all agree.


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