

BUSINESS OF LAW

How women can develop business

They need to invest time and resources, leverage differences as strengths.

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IT IS UNDENIABLE that the legal profession has made remarkable progress in the area of diversity and equality for women. Today, many women attorneys are law firm partners widely regarded as leaders in their fields. Notwithstanding their successes, many of these same women have yet to develop significant books of business. Over time, client development increasingly becomes a critical factor in moving up the ranks in private law practice. Several obstacles, including a lack of effective mentoring and the difficulty of striking a manageable work-life balance, contribute to the challenge of bringing in business, particularly for women.

While many firms have instituted excellent professional development and diversity programs, these initiatives alone may not yet go far enough in confronting the specific challenges faced by many women attorneys in generating substantial business. Women attorneys, however, can take more control over their careers by focusing on their approaches to business development. By leveraging some of their differences as strengths, women attorneys may discover some innovative, effective and decidedly non-traditional approaches to developing business.

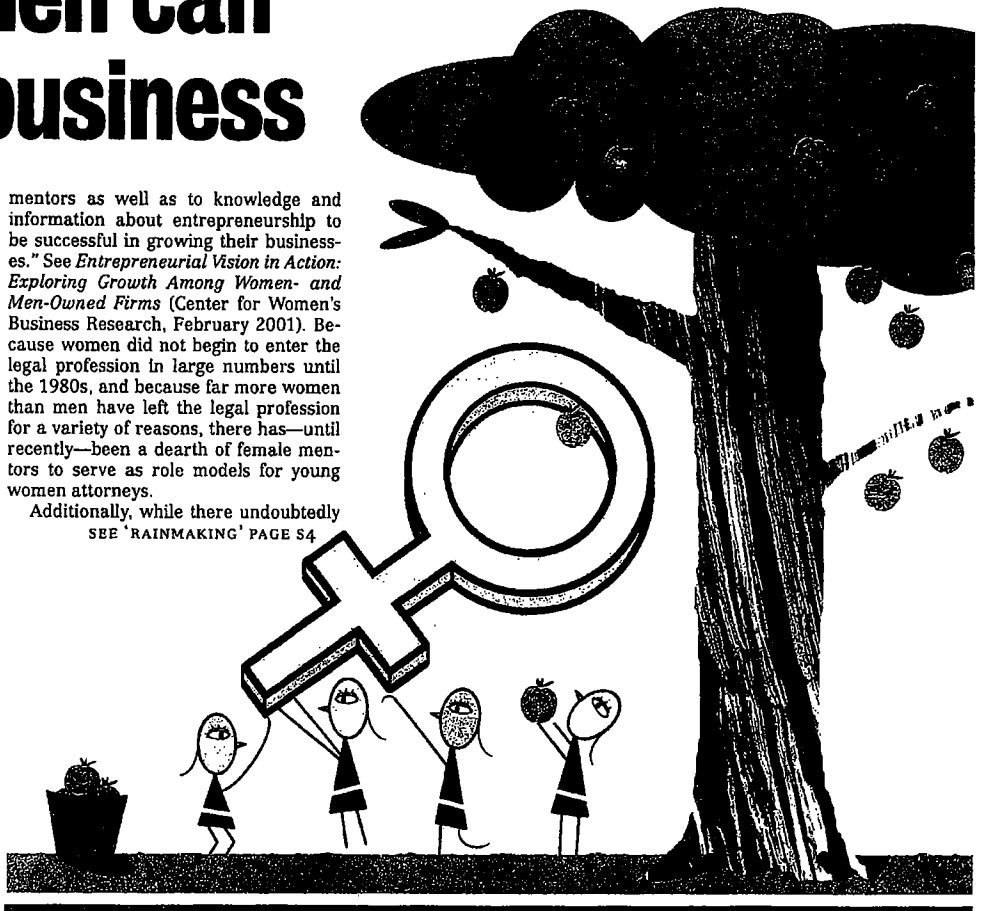
According to the Center for Women's Business Research, "[i]t is critically important that women have access to

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mentors as well as to knowledge and information about entrepreneurship to be successful in growing their businesses." See *Entrepreneurial Vision in Action: Exploring Growth Among Women- and Men-Owned Firms* (Center for Women's Business Research, February 2001). Because women did not begin to enter the legal profession in large numbers until the 1980s, and because far more women than men have left the legal profession for a variety of reasons, there has—until recently—been a dearth of female mentors to serve as role models for young women attorneys.

Additionally, while there undoubtedly

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Women lawyers can succeed at rainmaking

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are exceptions, male attorneys often are more comfortable mentoring other men, with whom they share common experiences and perceptions. As a result, many women may feel they lack sufficient exposure to the practical skills required to be highly successful business generators. Missing this fundamental step in the professional development process may discourage women attorneys from investing the time and resources necessary to build and maintain a network of business contacts, especially for those who find that traditional networking methods do not work for them.

Mentoring programs and training related to strategic business topics are essential to the entrepreneurial aspects of practicing law. Many women appear to be reluctant, in ways that men might not be, to seek business from their friends or tout their own successes. Training programs tailored to address these cultural differences can be extremely helpful in promoting business development for women attorneys.

Drinks, dinner and golf

One of the biggest challenges for many women attorneys, including law firm partners, is striking a work-life balance that allows them not only to survive but to thrive. Meeting existing client demands, while simultaneously maintaining a personal life (which often includes being the primary caretaker for children or aging parents or both), can be daunting. These responsibilities, by themselves, consume all available hours. As a result, in many cases, women attorneys are required to choose between additional client development time and precious family time. For these understandable reasons, women may not allocate enough of their time and attention to business development, until they hit a plateau in their career and realize that they might not advance further without generating business.

Integrating business development into already busy lives requires ingenuity and creativity. Women attorneys should recognize that there may be alternative ways for them to develop business rather than through some of the traditional, and often male-oriented, methods, which often take place in the evenings or on weekends.

If women recognize that drinks, dinner and golf are not the only options, they can approach business development from a fresh perspective—one that might fit better with their schedules and, perhaps, with the schedules of many of the people with whom they could potentially establish business relationships. Breakfast, lunch and coffee meetings can provide attorneys the same opportunities for conversation in a comfortable setting and still allow them to arrive home in time to help with homework and to put children to bed.

By applying their resourcefulness and juggling capabilities, women attorneys can develop new opportunities for net-

working that may enable them to bring in more business.

Law firms can support women's business development efforts by encouraging female attorneys to consider nontraditional forms of networking that work best with their schedules and personalities, in the same way that firms have broken ground by offering alternative work schedules and establishing part-time work arrangements for associates and partners alike.

Women attorneys who want to generate significant business need to find the time to invest in rainmaking activities that can be reasonably integrated into their already-crowded lives. For example, women attorneys should consider how to develop business from their current networks of contacts and professional acquaintances by creating opportunities to connect on both a personal and a professional level. Many firms have discovered that wine tastings, cooking classes, book readings, spa treatments, yoga sessions and other events specifically targeted at female general counsels, organization leaders and other potential clients can be attractive venues for establishing relationships. The key is to embrace the differences in the way women often develop and maintain relationships and pursue business opportunities that capitalize on these differences.

For example, women attorneys should seek to develop business from the grow-

Women business owners are good prospective clients.

ing market of women business owners. According to the Center for Women's Business Research, women owners of fast-growing businesses prefer to consult with outside sources on issues of business management and growth. See *Entrepreneurial Vision in Action*, supra. The tendency to seek outside counsel makes these companies promising business development prospects, and offers women attorneys the possibility of establishing solid, trustworthy advisory relationships with women business owners.

Diversity: It's about time

Many major corporations are making a public commitment to hire law firms that support diversity and provide a diverse team to handle their legal matters. There is an increasing and welcome trend in which corporate clients specify that the relationship partner must be a woman or a minority. Women attorneys should identify which companies are seeking diverse leaders for their outside legal teams, and target their business development efforts toward those clients. Law firms should support those efforts through training and promotion of talented female and minority attorneys. Being active in this way allows firms to capitalize on their existing corps of capable and highly skilled female attorneys, positioning them to take advantage of these types of opportunities at a moment's notice.

The same people skills that frequently make a woman an excellent choice to chair a firm committee on matters such as recruiting, diversity or professional development also are valuable client-development tools. Women attorneys are often the backbone of strong client relationships, fostering repeat business because of well-honed communication

skills and reliable, attentive, responsive and creative client service. Diversity adds value to any legal environment, and recognizing and emphasizing the considerable strengths of their women attorneys allows law firms to retain and benefit from some of their most promising legal minds. Firms that fully recognize and reward women attorneys who establish successful client working relationships and manage important matters will build seasoned women leaders able to generate substantial business.

Women attorneys should consider approaching business development as a team effort. Although most women attorneys are deeply committed to winning their clients' cases, few wish to exhibit the same type of competitive conduct when it comes to their colleagues, and many are reluctant to tout their own achievements. Instead, women often

prefer to work collaboratively, and ensure all receive credit for the success of the team. An approach to business generation in which women embrace these tendencies may be the most effective.

Blowing the other's horn

For example, if two women make a proposal to represent a client together, each can promote the other's capabilities and achievements without reservation, and the potential client will obtain validation of both women's skills and talents and simultaneously come to understand the ways in which those strengths complement one another to the client's advantage.

Women attorneys also can make a conscious effort to refer clients to other women attorneys when possible and to cross-sell female colleagues in different practice areas within the firm when

meeting with existing clients. Senior-level attorneys should try to include female associates on important cases, and play a mentoring role whenever possible. Even outside of the office, women attorneys can reach out to female business leaders they meet through professional and social clubs and organizations.

Positive change does not just happen; it takes time and effort. Developing business, like any other endeavor, requires commitment. By taking a fresh look at the characteristics that have led to their achievements, women attorneys may discover some new approaches to business development. Firms can benefit by acknowledging that the differences in many women's styles and personalities are assets that, if cultivated and valued, can add to the bottom line by increasing the number and variety of clients the firm can secure. ■