

2010 Holiday Travel & Gift Guide

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How to Start and Run a Thriving Small Practice

ECONOMIC REALITIES and entrepreneurial impulses are driving an unprecedented number of new attorneys to launch their own practices. Solo and small legal practices present new attorneys a host of opportunities—to gain experience, to take control of their careers, to build a book of business, and to have real work-life balance. However, the challenges can be daunting. Unlike being an associate at a law firm or a junior attorney at a nonprofit organization or public agency, solo and small firm attorneys must not only perform the legal work but find clients and run a business all at the same time.

Fortunately, these attorneys do not have to learn how to do all this by themselves. Books and resources with practical and strategic advice abound. Jay G. Foonberg's *How to Start and Build a Law Practice* is especially helpful. The best advice, however, comes directly from solo and small firm practitioners who are facing the challenges of building a law practice. They concur on the following points.

First, reconnect with your contacts.

Your first business development step should be getting in touch with all your past and present contacts. Arrange lunch or coffee dates to catch up with friends, classmates, colleagues, relatives, and even acquaintances. If you inspire them to feel connected to your new endeavor, they will remember you when they have a matter to refer. One attorney recounts that those initial meetings in the first few months of practice garnered several significant referrals, including the attorney's biggest client to date. However, even when starting up, it pays to be judicious in taking cases. You will be eager to gain as many new clients and cases as possible, but you build a successful law practice not by the cases you take but by the cases you do not take.

In addition to looking up old friends, you will need to make new ones. Networking is your key to success. You will not survive in Los Angeles's competitive legal market unless you practice networking. Become active in multiple organizations and groups. Put in the effort to meet as many people as you can. Your ability to connect with other professionals as part of a larger network will be the key to your long-term success.

Once cases come in, it will be easy but wrong to ignore the business side. Before you take clients, do your homework. Try to get a sense of what other attorneys in your field charge and request for retainers. Research malpractice insurance and the best business structure for your practice. Other small business owners—not just lawyers—can be extremely valuable resources.

Servicing your clients is business development. Your current clients could be your best sources of future business. Giving extra attention to your current clients will reap rewards beyond what you can immediately see. That is, giving a current client more time (without compensation) will help the client appreciate you as good counsel, a listener, and an attorney to whom they will want to refer other clients. That give-and-take is important for business development.

Do not be afraid to call experienced attorneys with questions. Even simple questions—such as, Where should I park for a particular courthouse? or, What information should I jot down on my business card for the clerk?—are worth asking. You will quickly realize you did not learn anything about the actual practice of law in law school. As soon as you lose this apprehension to ask questions, each day will go more smoothly. Remember, all lawyers were in your shoes with the same empty feeling of just not knowing—so ask.

While developing clients and running a business, take some time to predict the future. As a lawyer starting your own practice, you are

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now competing in a highly hierarchical industry. Your clients have the option of working with attorneys with decades more experience. To keep up and get ahead, you will need to aggressively develop your core area of practice. Track the business trends, case law, and legislation in your area. Be ready to advise clients on how they can plan for the future.

When you work for yourself, the boss is the client. Keep your clients happy, and your practice will flourish. Believe in your ability to build a successful practice. Clients want attorneys who are confident in their abilities. Clients also want attorneys who are responsive—and in the era of Blackberries and text messaging, they expect hyper-responsiveness. Failure to return calls is the basis for most grievances against attorneys with their state bar associations.

Finally, remember whether you are solo or have several partners, you are not alone in this endeavor. Should you start your own practice, you will join a growing community of ambitious young attorneys in Los Angeles. They are not your competitors but colleagues in your new endeavor, and you will be practicing law in this city for a long time. For example, I regularly consult some of the bright young lights in the Los Angeles legal community—Ori Blumenfeld, Adam Gauthier, Arash Khorsandi, Daren Schlecter, David Soffer, Jonathan Yagoubzadeh, and Raymond Zolekhian—when a complex legal issue, a thorny ethical dilemma, a business development opportunity, or a basic practical question arises.

Once you start your own practice, do not forget that there is a community of solo and small firm practitioners—including the Association's Small Firm and Solo Practitioner Section—who are eager to share what they know of the best (and worst) practices. ■

Sam Yebri is a founding partner of Merino Yebri, LLP, a boutique litigation firm in Century City.