

Biz Development Tip Of The Month: Start Early In Your Career

By **Kristin Housh** (November 17, 2025)

In today's competitive legal market, attorneys must excel at business development in addition to the practice of law, despite a lack of business training in most law school curricula. In this Pulse Expert Analysis series, experts share real-world tips each month to help fill the learning gap. If you're interested in writing for the series, please reach out to expertanalysis@law360.com.

When I was a junior associate, I thought business development was the sole province of gray-haired partners who raked in millions of dollars in originations each year on the strength of their networks alone.

In my mind, these rainmakers, who looked nothing like me, sat around schmoozing with Fortune 500 executives at golf clubs or resorts — lives very different from my own, in which I pulled all-nighters with my nose to the grindstone.

No one spoke to me about business development at that stage in my career. I was focused on being the best lawyer I could be, convinced that doing impressive work was the way to eventually make partner.



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To the extent I thought about how those rainmakers first got started building their book of business, I chalked it up to some innate quality or mere luck.

Spoiler: Rainmaking isn't magic or something that requires inherent charisma. Business development just takes the right mindset, hard work and the courage to put yourself out there — the earlier, the better.

As a partner who has found both success and enjoyment in winning new clients, I found that starting early in my career offered a major advantage. As I built and strengthened my network, referrals picked up momentum.

One connection would become a new client. That client would bring in multiple matters — and refer me to other connections, who in turn became clients. The process repeated again and again, growing my reputation and my book of business.

Getting started was the hardest part. Here's how to begin.

Make time for connection.

The first few years of your legal career are defined by long nights of hard work and limited free time. Sadly, you won't win new clients working alone at your desk. One of the best ways to meet new people and identify business development opportunities is simply by putting yourself out there and saying "yes" to invitations.

In fact, one of my first big business development breaks came from a children's birthday party, of all things. I went in expecting an afternoon of kids' activities and birthday cake.

What I did not expect was a chance meeting that led to my first major break into the world of business development.

I ended up reconnecting with another guest at the party, a friend I hadn't seen in years who had started her own business. Now that it was starting to see financial success, people were coming out of the woodwork claiming they had been promised equity, a common problem for successful ventures.

It was a situation I was well-equipped to help her with, since I handle what I call "business divorces" — lawsuits involving internal business disputes among partners or shareholders as well as external business disputes, including breakups with vendors, service providers, contractors and distributors.

I went back and forth for weeks about whether to follow up and ask for her business. It felt cringeworthy, and I expected to get a "thanks, but no thanks," since she had already retained a law firm.

But when I mustered up the courage to send a text saying I was happy to give her a second opinion, I ended up winning the business from the other firm. That chance meeting ended up leading to a yearslong business relationship involving multiple litigation and transactional matters.

Once I got over the mental roadblock, other business development opportunities stemming from my connections started to pop up everywhere. I started truly listening to people when they confided in me regarding their business issues, many of which inevitably included legal problems, and offering myself up as both a sounding board and a "fixer."

For example, a good friend and entrepreneur shared that she and her business partner had fundamental disagreements on the operations and finances of their LLC and were essentially in a stalemate.

I laid out a variety of ways in which they could part ways, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and ultimately won her business.

I also kept my eyes and ears open for opportunities to become a connector and referral source.

For example, two friends — a husband-and-wife team who own a boutique law firm — have referred new clients to me every so often after I sent them an initial referral a few years ago for a matter that was outside my practice.

I also started referring business to certain opposing counsel when I was conflicted out or the matter was outside my wheelhouse, and they have returned the favor in spades.

Get involved locally.

For those hesitant to start tapping personal relationships, local professional groups can also be a good way to get a glimpse into the business development world.

The professional connections I made through my involvement with the Welsh Inn of Court in San Diego, an organization that trains lawyers in trial advocacy, started to yield referrals for matters that were aligned with my practice.

While it took a few years of being involved in the Inn of Court to start seeing referrals trickle in, it was necessary to plant the proverbial seeds early on.

Community involvement doesn't have to be law-related. For example, I joined a San Diego entrepreneurs group thanks to a friend, who herself later became a client. As a result, I was able to attend gatherings where I could ask questions about people's businesses, take a genuine interest in their work, and — when their problems aligned with my practice — take them on as clients.

I've also had success stemming from a peer-to-peer advisory group I joined with support from my firm. The group offers both business development coaching and opportunities to connect with women in other industries.

We often end up referring work to each other that aligns with our diverse skill sets and backgrounds, from accounting to law to media. Everybody wins.

Develop a clear, catchy niche.

Whether it's at a kid's birthday party or a professional networking event, putting yourself out there is just the first step in winning business. To convert a connection into a potential client, you need to be able to communicate what you do in a way that people can remember.

I have sat through plenty of trainings on elevator pitches throughout my career. But often the best way to develop one is through hands-on practice.

What I learned is that it's not only important to clearly and coherently explain what you do — but it also helps to make it something catchy. A close friend introduces her environmental entitlement practice by saying "I do birds and bunny rabbits," for example.

It also helps if you have a niche that reflects the type of work you enjoy and want to do more of. While being a generalist can be useful, it can be hard for others to understand or remember what that means in practice.

A friend might not connect the dots that her business problem aligns with my work if I just say I'm a litigator. But if I say I'm a "business divorce" lawyer? She's much more likely to remember and call me when she has a dispute with a co-founder.

It comes down to storytelling. I've won business from lawyers with far more trial experience because I was able to explain to the prospective client how my experience aligned with the issue at hand.

By offering specific examples of how I'd successfully resolved similar problems, I demonstrated that I had the skills and understanding necessary to solve their problem too.

Be confident yet vulnerable.

Try to project confidence, even when you don't feel it. People want to hire lawyers who seem reliable and capable, not those drowning in self-doubt. Don't be afraid to ask for work and to sell your services — you never know where it might lead.

Even with the perfect pitch and ample opportunities, it's important to remember that business development isn't necessarily easy, especially when you're first starting out.

There's always the risk of rejection. Maybe you didn't have the experience they were looking for. Maybe they just preferred someone else.

I've even lost potential clients because I didn't fit their idea of what a "bulldog litigator" looks or sounds like. But you'll just need to dust yourself off and keep going.

Through it all, try to have the courage and confidence to show vulnerability. After I wrote about my challenging pregnancy and the need for better prenatal accommodations, people reached out to share their stories, too — and it even won me business.[1]

I was able to bond over the importance of health and family with a business owner who had recently battled cancer and was in and out of the hospital himself, a connection that eventually became a client relationship — beating out multiple other law firms that were competing for the work.

Remember, business is personal.

Becoming a rainmaker isn't about having the perfect pitch or a flawless strategy (though that can certainly help). It's about showing up as yourself and building genuine relationships over time. By leading with empathy, listening carefully and letting people know you truly care, opportunities will come your way.

No one is going to give you permission, especially early in your career. You just need to get started. Once you start seeing success, you may discover that you enjoy the process — and that it becomes easier with every step.

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[1] <https://www.dailyjournal.com/article/385849-from-corner-office-to-er-the-urgent-need-for-prenatal-policies-and-accommodation>.