Effective Time Management for Lawyers: Is it Really Possible?

By Steve Fretzin

As a coach working exclusively with attorneys, no one understands the stress and demands placed on a legal practitioner better than I do. Sometimes it feels like my entire day entire day revolves around the demands being placed on lawyer's time. Not to mention the additional stress that's created when we discuss investing time in business development. It makes perfect sense why most attorneys shy away from their marketing activities.

Time challenges aside, you must know by now that nothing will have a greater impact on your personal and financial freedom than having your own book of business. Therefore, it's never been more important to effectively manage your time to ensure you can fit in the billable hours and business development. By the way, it sure would be nice to see your family too! Here are three tips to help you improve the balance in your practice to create the career you've been dreaming of:

Time Tip #1: Have a solid plan for business development

Other than doing nothing, the worst thing you can do as a lawyer is to approach business development in a haphazard fashion. Attending events, writing articles or even speaking can be ineffective if your audience isn't aligned with your goals. You need to have a plan in writing to ensure you are spending your time in the right places with the right people. Think about the types of legal buyers and strategic partners you need to meet. Ask yourself, where do they spend their time? How do I get in front of them? How many do I need to build relationships with to really grow my book?

A good plan should lay out your goals, strategies and tactics to accomplish your objectives in the fastest time possible. Think of the plan as a GPS for your car. Before we had this tool, we would drive miles out of our way before turning around or heaven forbid ask for directions. Now the GPS tells us when we made a bad turn and how to get back on track. This is what a good plan will do for you.

Time Tip #2: Use your calendar to schedule time for business development

You schedule our meetings for a closing, deposition or a trial, then why not schedule time for business development. They are all important and need to get done, so treat them with equal importance. Based on where you are in your career, how much time you need to carve out and your goals to grow your book, there needs to be an emphasis on carving out time daily or weekly for business development. Here are a couple of thoughts and best practices to think about:

- Look at your calendar to find times when you are less likely to be distracted by email, phone calls or other people in your office. Not to boast, but I get into my office three days a week at 6 am. This gives me a solid six hours a week when I can get emails out, leave voice mails or make contacts through LinkedIn. If you're a night owl, that might be better for you.

- Once you do get meetings on your calendar, be sure to use the meeting invite tool to ensure that these meeting stick. Changing schedules and cancellations are sometime inevitable; however we can curtail them slightly by getting into someone's calendar right away. If you're not sure how to use this tool, ask the person in the office next to you. It's become as popular as emailing.
- Use your calendar to schedule EVERYTHING! If you have to make a call, write an email or follow up with someone, schedule it. As I mentioned earlier, you need to start treating your marketing activities the same way you treat the law. Think of your schedule like an advanced "to-do" list. The more you use your calendar to schedule things, the more you will actually do. Just seeing a follow up call pop up on your screen will prompt you to follow through.

Time Tip #3: Always pick the low-hanging fruit first

With all of the networking groups, associations and coffee meetings to choose from, you may quickly find your time drained away from you. One of the first things I suggest to attorneys is to look closely at their network and find the easiest way to obtain new business. This might include meeting with existing clients to cross-sell, up-sell or find quality introductions. There might also be some family or friends who are in power positions, but haven't been properly tapped into yet. Whatever the situation, it's critical to leverage these contacts first.

A few concerns that you might have with this approach is the possibility of "blowing" the opportunity or "disrupting" the relationship. While this is always a remote possibility, here are some soft and gentle approaches that might ease your mind when venturing into uncharted territory:

- Be curious. You're a lawyer right? Use that as your excuse to ask a thousand questions about this person's business. Everyone has goals and challenges that they're more than happy to share with you. Just be a great listener and ask open-ended questions to uncover possible needs. Then it might be more natural to discuss your value or services. By the way, "value" might be discussing the law in your office over coffee or referring them to someone else who can help solve a problem. Either way, you will have a much better idea of the opportunity for you to do business now or in the future.

  An example of this would be at a family function where you see Uncle Dan every year. He owns a $20 million-dollar website company. You can ask him, "What do you love about your business?" and "What types of challenges do you have running a company of that size?" Once you start Uncle Dan talking about his favorite subject, himself and his business, you can keep asking deeper questions to identify a possible need or a question he might have for you on the legal side.

- Ask for Advice. In this scenario, you are looking to better understand the mindset of a business owner or GC as you are working to grow your own practice. Ask some great questions to obtain their advice and help. It’s then possible that they might try to help you with your goals, make an intro to someone they know or allow you to share your knowledge to help with a problem within their own company.

- Look to obtain an introduction from an existing client. Look, you’re good at what you do and your client is very happy. In addition, you’ve invested time taking her to lunch, a game, golfing, etc. Maybe it’s time to ask for a high level introduction to someone in her network that might want to have a similar experience.

  It might make sense to schedule a lunch with your client, and before getting off the call say, “I’m looking forward to our lunch on Friday. I do have a favor to ask that would be really meaningful to me. I know you are well connected and have been very happy with my work. Would you be open to introducing me around to one or two of your business associates?” This type of question is permission based and should be received positively. The worst that can happen is that she will say “no.” The best thing can be an intro to a new client that could make your year! Plus, if she does say “no,” it might be a wake-up call that you might need to work on your relationship building skills.

One way or another, you have to get your time under control. Remember, no one ever said on their death bed, “If only I had billed a few more hours.” You can create a more focused and balanced approach to your practice by creating a plan, better utilizing your calendar and focusing on the low hanging fruit.

Please feel free to reach out to me at steve@fretzin.com if you have any questions or are looking to go a new direction with your marketing efforts. Also, you can find out more at www.fretzin.com.