

The art of asking for referrals

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Two years ago, Boston personal injury lawyer Russell Rosenthal adopted the practice of asking clients for referrals. It was a simple but powerful marketing tool that caused his client referrals to jump dramatically.

"At first, I was very reluctant to try this," he said. "I was concerned that people would find it offensive. But once I found a comfortable way to mention it, no one seemed turned off at all. Soon, I made a habit of it and incorporated into most client conversations. It had a bigger impact than I imagined. In fact, referrals from my clients have increased over 200 percent."

For Russell, this was a way to tap into a market that existed just beyond his reach – the family and friends of his past and present clients. Certainly, delivering quality service will garner a certain percentage of referrals: people who like you will tell others. But what about clients who like you, but forget about you when their grandmother needs a will or their neighbor needs to litigate against his employer? Would it really make a difference if you planted the seeds for potential referrals while you were still working with these clients?

According to Russell, it does.

"Not only do I make it a point to mention that my practice has been built on referrals, members of the staff take the opportunity to reinforce this when it's appropriate."

But this is an extraordinarily difficult thing for most attorneys to do. It's just too uncomfortable.

I've lectured thousands of attorneys over the years on the subject of marketing, and almost without exception they tell me, "I don't want to sound desperate or too aggressive when I'm marketing. I don't want to sound like I'm soliciting business."

Fortunately, they don't have to. The key to developing this small but powerful rainmaking habit lies in the ability to ask the question in a way that doesn't come across as aggressive. The language you use makes all the difference, not only in your comfort level but also in how the message is received.

We've found the best referral requests often start out as acknowledgements or expressions of gratitude and are said in such a way that is friendly and service-oriented.

The following are some examples used by attorneys in our marketing program. Some may sound too formal to you – others too familiar – but what they all do is convey the right message without sounding too pushy.

- For use with clients.

The most effective rainmakers take well-connected clients out to lunch and conduct informal exit surveys. Before they finish, they work in their version of the statements listed below.

Steve, we've really enjoyed working with you on this matter. Our practice has been built on referrals from satisfied (or good, or great) clients like you. Please don't hesitate to mention our name to others we might be able to help.

Rachel, it was a pleasure getting to know you. Please keep in mind we'd be happy to help any family or friends of yours who need legal services in the future.

George, I really enjoy working with clients like you and I'd appreciate it if you would mention our firm to anyone else that could use our assistance.

Grace, I thank you for your business and would appreciate it if you passed my name on to anyone that you feel I could help.

Referrals from good clients like you, Carole, are the foundation of my practice. Thank you for your business and feel free to recommend us to others.

Ben, I built my practice by working with great clients like you. Please let us know if we can be of further help to you or assist your friends or family in any way.

Judy, if you feel we served you well, please let others know what we can do for them.

- For use with referral sources.

You can take a similar tack when talking with your referral sources. Create the opportunity by asking them out to lunch to thank them for a client they've recently referred, or, if you haven't been good at thanking your referral sources along the way, *all* the clients they've referred, or tried to refer in the past:

Thank you for thinking of us with your many referrals, Tom. Though we're not good at saying it sometimes, we really appreciate the clients you send and make every attempt to take great care of them.

I've enjoyed working with all the clients you've sent, Chris. Please don't hesitate to send anyone else you work with that could use our services.

Pam, thanks for sending Hugh over to see me. I really enjoyed working with him and would certainly do my best to help any of your other clients.

Please don't hesitate to send us clients – we're never too busy to take care of anyone you might refer, Larry. In fact, my receptionist has special instructions to interrupt me immediately whenever one of your referrals calls.

Here's another situation that you may need a script to navigate. You've briefly met a potential referral source and want to cultivate him or her, but don't quite know what to say to initiate the relationship. Use the following script to get you over the hump:

Why don't we get together and go out to lunch next week? I'd enjoy learning more about your business and could tell you a little bit about mine...

I'd like to invite you over to my office to learn more about what you do and see if there's a way we can network in the future...

A few simple scripts can also be helpful when you have friends who have the ability to send you clients, but for some reason, never have. First, make sure they know what you do. You'd be surprised how many of your friends and acquaintances don't know exactly what you do. Once they understand, use one of the following scripts to take the relationship to the next level:

John, I'd enjoy building more of a business relationship with you to see if I can be of some service to your clients in the future. Why don't we meet for lunch next week and talk about it?

Jason, I've built my practice on referrals from a lot of people in this community and it would be a privilege to work with anyone you think could use my services. Why don't we get together next week and talk about it?

If you add one new skill to your client development arsenal this year, make it count. These brief, scripted statements do not sound aggressive, but have the power to produce significant results for your practice.

Don't rely upon clients, friends or potential referral sources to automatically know you welcome referrals. Many professionals are savvy about this, but many of the other people you meet may not be. It is up to you to educate them. Don't rely on what we call the "Blanche DuBois" theory of marketing – "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers." Master the power of your language to take you where you want to go.

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