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ABA General Practice, Solo & Small Firm Division

GPSOLO April/May 2009

[BACK TO GPSOLO APRIL/MAY 2009 ISSUE](#)  
[BACK TO GPSOLO MAGAZINE'S HOMEPAGE](#)

## Small Marketing Steps with Big Impact

By Aviva Cuyler

Right now, as you read this, someone out there needs the service you provide. If you allow yourself to be quiet enough, you might pretend to hear the click of keystrokes as your next lead searches online for what he or she needs. Or, you might imagine the murmur of lunch conversation as your potential prospect asks a friend for a referral. As a solo or small firm attorney, you've set yourself the formidable task of connecting with these people—finding them, helping them to find you. Luckily, not all of it is so formidable. There are a number of small marketing steps you can take right now—"small" in cost and relative time commitment—that can have an enormous impact on the growth of your business. Here's a look at some of them.

### Write a Plan

This is the single most important marketing action you can take. The writing is the key. Doubtless dozens of great "how-to-get-new-business" ideas pass through your head every day. How to make sense of them all? How to replace your attorney hat with a marketer hat and take the next step? Start writing, even if it's just a single page.

The process of committing important details to paper requires a clarity that makes all the difference. No matter what you do next, begin by crafting the answers to these questions: What are your financial goals? Is your objective to generate more billable hours or command a higher rate? Do you want to attract more of the same types of clients/cases or a different kind of client/case altogether? Who are your prospective clients? What is the best way to find (and engage) them?

These basic, yet critical questions are the beginning of a plan. The answers contain information that is essential to the growth of your practice. You begin to see things, for example, in terms of your clients' needs. Your service answers these needs, and a marketing message should explain this. You develop an understanding of your target market and where to find it—and equally important, where *not* to find it. If your target is C-level execs at big pharmaceutical companies, you probably don't need to advertise in the Yellow Pages.

This is all critical information that determines where and how you market your practice.

### Action items:

- Start with a written plan.
- Read "10 Steps to Create Your Law Firm Marketing Plan" by Stephen Fairley/The Rainmaker Institute (available at [www.jdsupra.com/10steps](http://www.jdsupra.com/10steps)).

### Cultivate Your Existing Network

Many people become so invested in trying to get what they don't have—new leads, new prospects, new clients—that they often miss what's right under their noses.

Reach out to the connections you already have, your current network. Law practice consultant Allison Shields (of Legal Ease Consulting, Inc.) says:

Former and existing clients can be your best potential source of business if you don't let them forget about you. Schedule in-person meetings with clients every few months (off the clock) with no specific agenda in mind, other than getting to know your clients and their needs better. Periodically check in with former clients, too—they might have new legal needs or know someone who could use your services.

Attorney and author Carolyn Elefant (of MyShingle.com) agrees: "Host a happy hour or lunch at your office and invite people you haven't seen in a while. I always get a couple of referrals after I do something like that. It's not high tech but it works!"

Marketers call this type of target "lowest-hanging fruit"—you don't need to know the term to

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see the big value in this kind of small action.

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If you're just starting out and don't have much of an existing client base, turn to an even more immediate network: family and friends. Legal business strategist David Lorenzo describes these people as your "natural network." In "How to Market a Small Firm for Less Than \$500" (available at [www.jdsupra.com/dlorenzo1](http://www.jdsupra.com/dlorenzo1) ) he writes: "Leverage this network to the hilt. Call everyone—your friends, relatives, and business associates—past and present. Let them know that you are on your own and explain to them the value you provide."

#### Action items:

- Schedule lunches with existing and former clients, just to stay in touch.
- Regularly call or e-mail your network; keep up-to-date with their news and share yours.
- Send a regular newsletter (by mail or e-mail), sharing useful information with your audience.
- Follow up with phone calls or e-mails—especially if you've said you'll follow up!
- Remember birthdays and anniversaries; mark seasonal holidays; send a handwritten note or personal card.

Last December, while monitoring online conversations on Twitter, I was struck by how many lawyers mentioned that they were writing out holiday cards. No small irony that the legal professionals embracing cutting-edge online technologies still rely on tried-and-true gestures that make a huge difference: a handwritten note, a holiday card.

#### Don't Just Market Yourself, Be an Expert

You don't need to *become* an expert; you already are one in your field of practice. This requires an attitude adjustment more than anything else. At its core, I think, is the difference between reactive and proactive marketing. It's an approach that allows you to be a passionate lawyer rather than a reluctant marketer.

Instead of trying to get prime placement in the Yellow Pages or to compete for Google AdWords, look for opportunities to showcase your expertise. Make yourself available as a leading source of free legal information, both online and locally. Your expertise is one of your most valuable marketing assets; share it wisely and it can make an enormous difference to your business growth. Remember: Informed leads still need your legal service.

#### Action items:

- Volunteer at local legal aid organizations or via national groups such as Pro Bono Net.
- Make yourself available as a lecturer for local trade organizations, clubs, or your bar association.
- Join the online conversation. Start a blog and make comments in the blog posts of others whenever relevant or worthwhile.
- Pitch and publish articles, both off- and online (a point that has additional considerations, discussed later in this piece).

#### Manage Your Online Footprint

We live at a time when the word "Google" has become a verb ("I Googled him and found some interesting stuff"). More than ever, the Internet is a primary information source in our daily lives. Studies show this to be true across most demographics, including C-level executives and your fellow legal professionals (a major source of referrals).

You will be Googled. Count on it. Don't just count on it, do something about it. Start by typing your own name into the world's most dominant search engine. What are the results? Now, do it again—this time, Google your competition.

Because so many prospects and leads inevitably turn to the Internet to learn more about you (by searching on your name), that first page of Google search results has become something akin to a Digital Age résumé. Luckily, there's much you can do to manage those first ten results. Every step in this direction will make an enormous difference.

If you don't already have one, start an account at LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com) ) and take the 15 minutes or so necessary to create a complete profile. Google "likes" LinkedIn, and before long you should find that a search on your name includes your profile in the first page of results.

The same holds true for the website I founded, JD Supra ([www.jdsupra.com](http://www.jdsupra.com) ). We've noticed that before long most JD Supra profiles also appear in the first page of related search results. Do the same at Justia's free legal directory ([www.justia.com](http://www.justia.com) ). With very little effort, you will have taken possession of three of those first ten results on Google. You are now shaping your online résumé, controlling the message.

Tim Stanley at Justia recommends additional steps. Start a blog and (if you don't already have one) a website. For both, online offerings range from free to expensive. Blogs and websites require a time commitment that makes them more than "small" marketing endeavors. Still, if you have the time, you can try your hand at them without paying thousands of dollars. There are a number of free services that Stanley recommends, such as Google's Blogger.com or WordPress.com.

Additionally, author and business strategist Ari Kaplan suggests monitoring your online presence with Google Alerts, which are easy to set up and available from any search result page. Google will e-mail an alert any time it indexes a new page containing your keywords. Kaplan suggests monitoring those people that you would like to meet or with whom you would like to build a relationship. This may provide you with thoughtful opportunities to connect in a meaningful fashion.

**Action items:**

- Join LinkedIn, Justia, JD Supra, and other networking, publishing, or directory services.
- Start blogging. Build a website if you don't already have one.
- Monitor your online presence—and the presence of your competitors and those with whom you want to connect—via Google searches and Google Alerts.

**Publish, Publish, Publish**

David Lorenzo again ("How to Market a Small Firm for Less Than \$500"):

One good way to get in front of your target market is to write and pitch articles to trade magazines that target your niche. Trade magazines are always looking for good content, and they include a byline with your name and contact information. This will not produce immediate results, but it will have a cumulative effect if prospective clients keep seeing your name and information.

By regularly publishing in niche markets, you're not only grabbing the attention of your target audience, you're also establishing yourself as an expert. If a LinkedIn profile *tells* people what you're good at (by listing your professional credentials), an informative, on-topic article *shows* it by displaying your expertise as you digest, analyze, and present important developments in your field of practice.

Moreover, in this digital Age of Information, regularly publishing your written work has additional benefits with enormous impact on your marketing efforts. As mentioned earlier, it's relatively easy to manage what people find online if they're able to search on your name. Much harder: the job of being noticed in the crowd by people who don't know your name but need your service. This is where Internet publishing makes all the difference in the world.

Your online written work will almost certainly be indexed by the major search engines (Google, Yahoo!, etc.). The more regularly you publish, the more chances you have of connecting with someone searching for the type of information you are providing. If the work connects back to you—well, that's powerful marketing. That's known as "Content Marketing."

This model is at the heart of JD Supra, where legal professionals publish and distribute filings, briefs, articles, and other documents *and* connect the work to a practice-specific profile.

Content marketing is also one of the drivers in the popularity of blogging. It is no longer necessary to rely on the schedules and whims of busy editors; now, we can create and brand our own online publishing channels. For those who have time for it, blogging is a part of this strategy.

Because of the length and focus of this article, I've barely scratched the surface of online content publishing. Once you are in the habit of regularly posting work online, there are ways to "connect the dots": to connect who you know with what you know. And the possibilities of this kind of dynamic online distribution and promotion are practically endless.

**Action items:**

- Identify trade periodicals that influence your target market. Regularly pitch story ideas with the goal of getting published as often as possible.
- From Ari Kaplan again: Ask for an interview with a leading figure in your field, record it, and post it online as a podcast.
- Begin an e-mail newsletter and promote it (and solicit subscribers) on your website and blog. Regularly send your audience real content.
- Publish online, on JD Supra or wherever a target audience might find you (blogs, etc.).
- Repurpose. Don't let your work collect virtual dust on your hard drive. Get it online as much as possible—let Google and the other search engines index it.

**Ask**

Other than committing a plan to paper, this may well be the easiest thing you can do, with the greatest impact. We hear it all the time from business development professionals, sales teams, and marketers: You don't get what you don't ask for. So ask for business.

Here's how best-selling author Patrick McKenna, a leading international figure in legal practice strategy, puts it:

A top fear shared by all of us is having to ask for the business, even if we know we can meet a prospective client's need. ("I don't want to appear too pushy.") Often, it's just a simple matter of the appropriate wording. Asking for the business is the natural conclusion of having a solution to your prospect's problem. All you have to do is say so.

As a solo lawyer who ran her practice for more than 12 years and now as the founder of a new online venture, I know that these are words to live by. And so, I close not with action items but further suggestions from Patrick McKenna. Here are some phrases that he thinks might help you to close the deal:

- "We would be honored to work with you on this matter. What will it take to get started?"
- "It looks like we have created the right solution for what you need, and we can do this within a reasonable budget. Are you ready to move forward?"
- "You said that you would like to have these agreements in place by the end of this month. Working backward, that gives us only two weeks to get all the parties to meet, so I'd recommend starting on Tuesday. Does that work with your schedule, or would you rather begin on Monday?"

I wish you the best of luck.

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