

## Kicking Sand on the Big Guys: How to Network Your Way to Larger Corporate Clients

By Thom Singer



Mr. Singer is the director of business development for VCFO. He is also a professional speaker and the author of three books on the power of business development and networking, including *Some Assembly Required: How to Make, Grow and Keep Your Business Relationships* and *The ABC's of Networking*. He can be reached at [www.thomsinger.com](http://www.thomsinger.com) or (512) 970-0398.

---

There was a time when large corporations tended to work exclusively with big law firms. There were many reasons for this partnering, including exaggerated misperceptions about experience levels and reputations, all of which justified the higher rates. But times they are a changin'. As mega firms have taken their rates into the stratosphere, and recession concerns show real impact to companies, CEOs and general councils are looking to mid-sized regional firms and boutiques to handle much more of their legal work.

If your firm would like to take advantage of this trend and target larger corporations, you should embrace the power of business relationships, networking and referrals. There are hundreds of choices out there for companies seeking legal representation, so you must focus on developing a reputation in your business community that will lead bigger companies to notice you. A company will often only interview three or four firms on the "Short List", so the more often you make that list, the more business you will win. If you are not on the radar screen of bigger companies, you will never have a chance to be their law firm.

Here are five tips to get your effort on track:

**Start building relationships now.** Not every big company is currently seeking to replace their current law firms...yet! But with the ongoing recession and the high billing rates, more pressure is being put on GCs and other executives to find better fee structures. Start your networking now, as it takes time to establish and cultivate a reputation that will put you in a "top of mind" position. Building a network cannot be done overnight. In most cases it takes years. The sooner you embrace a culture of creating mutually beneficial networks, the sooner your firm will see the results. And the more people in your firm that embrace the effort, the more results you'll see. Conflicting messages or lack of interest from some partners and associates undermine your organization's ability to be viewed as a "go to" alternative to Big Law.

**Explain your experience.** Most mid-sized firms have amazing lawyers with the highest levels of experience, but they have been pushed aside over the years by the marketing efforts of Big Law. Do not hide the legal history of your attorneys (many of whom were trained at the same big law firms you are competing with) or the victories that your firm has accomplished. Invest in the hiring of experienced marketing professionals to help you execute a clear and concise message. Your marketing team is not an area to be “cheap” to save money. Your neighbor’s 23 year old daughter fresh out of college is not the best choice to lead your marketing department just because she costs less than a more seasoned professional.

**Provide value.** In this economy every client is seeking added value. Discover ways to inform and educate companies on the latest trends in your legal area of expertise. Write articles, host seminars and find unique ways to show companies that you desire to be their partner. Do not appear that you are trying to bill for every single minute of your time. Large law firms are being criticized for lack of flexibility in billing, so find ways to help the companies achieve their goals of lowering legal fees while showing how your firm brings them value beyond the matter at hand. Make their goals your goals and you will get their attention.

**It is not just about the decision makers.** Many attorneys make the mistake of thinking they should only network with C-Level executives and general counsels. They get frustrated when they have a hard time meeting and establishing friendships with these individuals, who are constantly being chased by dozens of lawyers and other service providers. Making connections with decision makers is wonderful, but due to the nature of their roles, they are hard to people to get to know quickly. However, creating bonds with people who have direct access to the senior people can produce the results you desire. Often the more junior people inside a company feel ignored by vendors, such as law firms, and would be thrilled to create a mutually beneficial business friendship. Once they know, like and trust you they will happily make the proper introductions to the decision makers. But do not try to “fake” it to use people for introductions, as your intentions will be discovered and you will harm the reputation you are hoping to create.

**Ask for referrals and their business.** If you do not tell others that you are looking for more business (and what type of business) they will not necessarily think to call you for their work or to refer you to others. Lawyers often assume that people will instinctively understand what type of law they practice or that they will know you are looking for more clients. You have to be willing to tell others about your career and the type of clients you are seeking, or they will never be able to help you. Additionally, once you are on the “Short List”, you also must make sure that the decision makers know that you would enjoy working with them. People want to feel they are important to others, so tell them how much you appreciate the opportunity to serve them. A mistake that many attorneys make is trying to act “too cool” to care; that attitude can lead a prospect to

believe the lawyer are not that interested in the work.

People will always prefer to do business with those they know, like and trust. Since you cannot know everyone, then creating an extensive network of referral sources and establishing a glowing reputation is the next best thing. In this effort, always aim to help others along the way; if you see networking only as your gain, you'll find it very hard to activate the power of their help in reaching your goal of more and larger clients.

© 2009 PBDI/SAGE PDI. This article comes from the March 2009 Issue of *ORIGINATE!*, the online monthly newsletter (with ongoing support resources) dedicated to helping individual lawyers develop business successfully in order to build their careers. Our September 2008 anniversary issue is complimentary; otherwise articles are usually available to subscribers only. Find out more about subscribing at [www.pbdi.org/originate](http://www.pbdi.org/originate).