

Calculated, aggressive steps



By Seth Darmstadter

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I have made an executive decision. I will write no more columns about how best to survive during an economic downturn in Chicago's legal marketplace.

In fact, I am so tired of the topic that I won't even go to stop writing about it, but I am not even going to read about it when other people write about it. It is time to move forward and shift focus to what we young attorneys can do in 2010 as the legal marketplace shows signs of recovery. For me, this year is not about resolutions or staying safe, but instead it is going to be about setting goals and taking the calculated and aggressive steps necessary to achieve those goals.

Tips #12-13 Set Attainable Goals and Move Forward

I will never forget the day in 1999 when my college roommate made the mistake of allowing me to see a poster that he kept hidden behind his bed. It contained two headings and two handwritten lists on a plain white poster board.

The headings were "Realistic Goals" on one side and "Unrealistic Goals" on the other. *I am not making this up.* On the "realistic" side he listed things such as the grades he aspired to earn, girls he hoped to date and places he wished to visit.

The "unrealistic" column (where he focused all of his energy) contained such aspirations as starring in a feature film, playing professional soccer, and becoming a dot-com billionaire. (Mind you, he had no training as an actor, failed to make our college soccer team and never purchased a single domain name.)

The last I checked, that former roommate was unemployed, living in his parents' basement and still unconvinced that the dot-com bubble had burst. Therefore my first two pieces of advice this month are to focus all of your

energy on attainable goals and to move out of your parents' house.

Tips #14-15 Make Your Goals Known and Ask For Help

Here I go taking my own advice again. Among my primary professional goals for 2010 is developing business. By way of this column and through conversations with the partners for whom I work, I have put that goal out there.

At first blush, that is a scary proposition because if I fail to develop business, my superiors, my friends, and the people who read this column all will know it. However, if I keep my goal a secret, I virtually eliminate my chances for success, and as I said above, this year is not about being safe.

I have written repeatedly that the practice of law is an apprenticeship.

That means we learn from more senior attorneys who take the time to assist us in our development.

Also, the law is a business and the commodity that we lawyers sell is our human capital. Therefore, by letting people know that I aspire to develop business this year, and then by asking senior attorneys to help me accomplish that goal, I am both seeking the assistance of more senior attorneys who already have had success in developing business of their own, and also I am advertising that I am interested in servicing the legal needs of new clients.

Recently I attended a business development training seminar and the presenter told us that one of the most important and overlooked ways one can get a new client is by asking friends and business associates for their business. I thought this sounded obvious, but while conceptually basic, I am realizing that it was sound advice.

On New Years Eve, while enjoying drinks

and appetizers in my living room, one of my friends mentioned that her company had been sued and the costs and stress of the litigation were beginning to take a toll on the business. I stopped her in her tracks and asked why she had not consulted with me about handling her litigation.

She looked at me blankly and said it was because she didn't know I would be interested in that type of work.

I put down my drink, looked her in the eye, told her I absolutely would be interested in representing her company and that I would love the opportunity to do so.

With that, I changed the subject and made a mental note to call her during the first week of January.

Before I had a chance to follow-up with my friend, she called me and we scheduled a meeting.

This month, along with one of the partners for whom I work, I will meet with this prospective client to discuss her company's litigation needs and our firm's ability to service those needs.

Tip #16 Be Patient — Success Takes Time

I believe I was absent on the day patience was taught in school. Still, career-related goals take time to achieve.

First chair at trial, maybe 6+ years; partnership, 7+ years; and client development seemingly goes on forever.

I have heard about the pursuit of a potential client taking 5+ years, while others tell tales of prospective clients immediately sending business their way.

The incubation period for business development varies and while patience does not guarantee success, giving up surely will result in failure. ■

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