

## **And Survey Says... Personal Referrals Are The Top Source Of Business For Lawyers**

**When it comes to business, there's no replacement for the personal touch.**

More than fifteen years ago when I first launched my blog, MyShingle.com, web-based marketing for lawyers was still in its nascency, while many of the now dominant social media sites like LinkedIn and Facebook hadn't even been invented. Within five years, online marketing had eclipsed traditional lawyer advertising in print media and particularly, the Yellow Pages. But as I recently discovered, as pervasive as the Internet is in all of our lives, it has yet to overtake the most old-school form of lawyer marketing: personal referrals.

Last week on a whim, I decided to poll my lawyer pals on Twitter, LinkedIn, and a private Facebook group to determine which form of marketing yielded the most significant percentage of revenue for their law firms. I figured that for sure, Internet sites would rank high if only because I drew my survey sample from lawyers who regularly use the web and social media to interact and communicate with other attorneys. Yet I was wrong: with few exceptions, of the 30 or so lawyers who responded, nearly all identified personal referrals — either from other lawyers or past clients — as their top source of business. The practice area didn't seem to matter: personal referrals topped the list for lawyers in criminal defense, estate planning and family law, entertainment law, and international law.

That said, the lawyers surveyed employed different approaches to generating referrals. One respondent teaches seminars and offers free CLE courses which have resulted in both direct hires as well as referrals. Another attorney advised joining bar sections in complementary practice areas — for example, an employment lawyer might join a corporate lawyer group to gain referrals on matters like workplace harassment that might be outside a general transactional lawyer's area of expertise. Some attorneys favor organized networking groups — like BNI, Le Tip, or Chamber of Commerce — which meet on a regular basis.

Many of the lawyers who succeeded in generating personal referrals shared a second feature in common: they brought something of value to the table. A few attorneys who had written books or articles and shared them with colleagues were rewarded with business. Likewise, one generalist attorney put on seminars that she co-branded with lawyers with specific expertise — such as workers' compensation. By generating business for colleagues, they readily reciprocate by sending business her way.

In large part, personal referrals are effective because the potential clients are primed to hire. As attorney Oscar Michelen tweeted:

“Even with all the social media I engage in nothing beats [lawyer and client referrals] which are steady and yield a high rate of retention because they come ready to hire.”

Still, as I mentioned, there were a handful of exceptions. Maryland real estate and environmental lawyer Stuart Kaplow reported that his blog, Green Building Law was his number one source of new clients for his sustainability and environmental law practice. Edward Adamsky, an elder law attorney identified print ads as one of his top two revenue sources. For one trademark attorney, social media and the web topped the list.

Of course, the one question that my survey didn't answer is why so many referrals come by way of personal connection. Is it because clients are only comfortable with a personal recommendation for an attorney given the seriousness of many legal matters? Or is it because clients aren't able to find lawyers online, and if they can, they lack the ability to distinguish between them? I don't know the answer — but it's a critical question for solo and small firm lawyers as they evaluate how to get the most bang for the buck out of their marketing initiatives.

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