

Overcoming the challenges of starting and growing a woman-owned law firm

by Renée Welze Livingston

You are an experienced and successful attorney. You have been practicing with an established firm for years. You have participated with others in the management of that law firm and are therefore well aware of the financial challenges that can lead to success or failure. You have your own client base. For personal and professional reasons, you decide to start your own law firm. The proposition can be intimidating, even for the most fearless. However, when you consider you are also a woman in a predominantly man's profession, the challenges can seem insurmountable. . . . This article is intended to provide a few thoughts on ways to overcome the challenges of starting and successfully growing a new law firm from the unique perspective of a woman trial attorney and business owner.



First, there are the issues of starting a law office: locating office space; selecting and purchasing computers, printers, photocopiers and fax machines; selecting and installing word-processing, time-keeping, accounting and file-management software; obtaining reasonably affordable and sufficient insurance coverage; selecting from a dizzying array of telephone systems; securing a line of credit; establishing vendor services and accounts; ordering supplies. This list goes on and on.

Then, there is the challenge of providing for a seamless transition for clients, opposing counsel, the court, experts and certain vendors.

Finally, after the dust settles, there is the challenge of developing and flourishing under a marketing and business development plan that capitalizes on the unique nature of your woman-owned law firm. The days of having to learn how to golf in order to succeed are gone. Today's women lawyers have ample opportunity to market their professional skills to other women professionals in "non-traditional" ways.

Women lawyers are historically poor in developing and maintaining cross-professional contacts. We do not attend

enough breakfast meetings, lunches, business organization mixers, country clubs, sporting events, golf/tennis tournaments and other places where business has traditionally taken place. Nor do we sponsor enough charity events or organize enough fundraisers.

Most of us do not have regular contact with insurance brokers, bankers, editors, real estate professionals, or other business consultants. There are myriad historical and sociological reasons for this phenomenon (which this particular article will not address) but the upside to developing these type of contacts is twofold — not only will those contacts be available to you and others (clients) needing a referral, but you will have the unique ability to direct business toward other women or minority-owned businesses and, at the same time, generate business for yourself.

In no particular order, the following are a few keys to success:

Hire people who share your commitment to diversity

Like most businesses, a law firm depends on a wide range of skilled employees and vendors to prosper. From receptionists to

associate attorneys, bankers to experts, it is critical to attract and retain people who embrace your commitment to being a successful woman-owned law firm. However, even in this day and age, not everyone shares the excitement of being part of something a little different. For example, you can still encounter an associate who finds it difficult to take direction from a woman supervisor, an expert who patronizes you, a vendor who makes sexist comments or a banker who gives your business less attention or credibility because you are woman-owned.

Yet there is simply no need to work with people who do not embrace your commitment to succeed as a woman-owned firm, as there are indeed many other employees, vendors and professionals in the marketplace who do share a commitment to diversity. To identify them, market your employment openings to specific audiences, participate in local bar association activities that support women's issues, attend business organization events and mixers that promote women business ownership, target minority or women-owned vendors and ask trusted friends and colleagues for referrals.

Have a list of women professionals readily available and use it — referrals breed referrals

One of the common tips given by marketing professionals — and one that really works — is to maintain a long list of referral sources: bankers, accountants, brokers, other attorneys, doctors, realtors, au pair agencies, experts, mediators and home chefs, to name a few. Often, a positive referral begets a return referral. For example, if you can refer a client or potential client to a trusted accountant, you have two potential return referrals — one from the satisfied client or potential client and the other from your accountant, who was grateful for the recommendation of her.

Once you identify someone you might like to work with, make sure her contact information is readily available. Make a point of finding out more about what the person or her company can do for you or your clients and what she is doing to network and promote women business ownership.

The key to success is developing a database with the names, numbers and specialties of each professional contact. Remember to include notes about when and how the contact was made, as well as to whom you may have made a referral, and do not forget to follow up. Many off-the-shelf software programs (Amicus and Outlook work well) make keep-

ing and updating a contact list a painless exercise.

Organizations with mission statements promoting the causes of women are also a good place to locate and develop business relationships. They often have membership directories and referral recommendations based on prior feedback. Queen's Bench in San Francisco is one such organization. Each of the local bar associations in the Bay Area has a Women's Section. National businesswomen's organizations have local chapters and are a great way to develop non-legal business contacts.

Women who receive referral business from you will remember it and will usually try to reciprocate.

Celebrate your minority-owned status with clients — they will be delighted to learn your philosophies are consistent with their own

Your clients will, of course, know you have started your own law firm. What they may not appreciate is that you have started a minority or woman-owned firm. While the decision for legal representation should be based on a lawyer's legal experience and skill, many clients are pleased to learn that their law firm is — besides providing high quality legal work — promoting a commitment to diversity similar to their own objectives.


There are many ways to market your

firm's minority or woman-owned status. You can include a statement in your firm's announcements or send letters to clients letting them know about your involvement in women-owned organizations or women-sponsored events. Celebrate your certification as a woman-owned firm with an open house. Invite clients to attend, sponsor or participate in educational, fundraising or networking events organized to advance diversity in the community. Circulate copies of articles you have authored for women's organizations or causes.

Market to other professional women — you will generally find a receptive ear

As recently as ten years ago, women were woefully underrepresented in key positions in the business world. They still are in many areas. However, more and more women are beginning to occupy executive positions in corporate America, as well as other senior management positions, such as risk managers, general counsel, chief financial officers, human resource directors and other similar decision-making positions. These are wonderful contacts for women attorneys. Women who reach these positions are successful in their own right and frequently feel an affinity for other successful women professionals. This affinity can often form the seed for a mutually beneficial professional relationship. ➔

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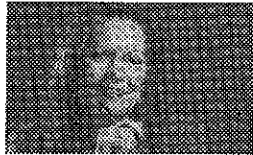
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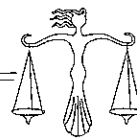


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Do not lose sight of the reasons why you started a woman-owned law firm

You started your woman-owned business for a reason. Maybe it was to work in an environment where meaningful client contacts are not assigned based on whether you have children. Maybe your prior firm did not embrace your non-traditional working hours or marketing efforts. Maybe you hit the glass ceiling. Maybe you rejected the idea that working part-time in order to be with small children meant you were less committed.

A special issue of *The Woman Advocate Newsletter*, published by the American Bar Association Section of Litigation, discussed the 50 top women litigators honored by *The National Law Journal* in December 2001. The publication was generally uplifting except for an article written by Amy J. Longo about four first- or second-year women lawyers who were asked about their perceptions on a variety of issues. Most disturbing were the responses as to whether women were treated equally in *today's* legal workplace and whether women and men had equal opportunities for promotion in the workplace. The message: *Not if you have or want to have a family.*

This should be an untenable proposition in a woman-owned firm and, with any luck, many talented but dissatisfied women lawyers will seek career opportunities in women-owned firms. Women lawyers can be everything they want or need to be—business owner, mother, wife — if employers remain committed to the flexibility this juggling requires. ◆

— *Renée Welze Livingston is a civil trial attorney and one of the founding partners of Livingston Tate LLP (a 100% women-owned firm) in Walnut Creek. A litigation boutique, this firm represents companies and individuals in defense of cases involving product liability, wrongful death and catastrophic injury, trucking, aviation and commercial transportation, premises liability and sexual assault and harassment.*