

## Business & Careers

# The tough business of going it alone



**Gary Mitchell**  
**The Coach**

For many lawyers the thought of starting up your own practice can be daunting. You are not alone. Almost every small business owner goes through the same angst. After all, this is a business. And there are many reasons why most people don't take the risk of starting up their own business—it's tough, there is risk and no guarantee of a steady paycheck and providing for your family, and you might fail.

However, on the flip side, the rewards of building something of your own are endless. Are you ready to take the plunge? Based on my experience coaching owners of smaller law firms, what follows are some tips to get you started in the best direction.

### Getting that first client

Getting your first client will likely be the hardest in your career. When you're just starting out your confidence will be low, but don't get discouraged. Reach out to all of your law school contacts and make sure they know what you are doing. Make sure all of your friends and relatives also know what you are doing.

Depending on your practice area, contact legal aid. I had one client that worked legal aid until they gave her files. Look for other lawyers in your practice area who are busy and need help. They might not be busy enough to hire an associate but busy enough to give you some contract work. And look for other lawyers in your practice area that prefer different types of files. I have two clients who work independently but refer work back and forth when it's not what they want and it does reflect what the other lawyer likes. Follow these tips and you are sure to get your first client, and more to follow.

### Red flags and common traps

The two most common traps I see lawyers going out on their own fall into are trying to do it all on your own and "willy-nilly" marketing.

Let's look at the first one. Are you still making photocopies yourself? Let's do the math. Let's say you bill out at \$250/hour. You spend on average two hours a day on non-billable tasks. You could hire someone at \$20/hour to take on those tasks. That means if you are able to bill for those two hours, you are \$460 ahead.

The other reason you shouldn't try and do everything on your own, like building your website for instance, is that you are not a web designer, you're a lawyer. So be one and hire other professionals to do other tasks. When your car breaks down you go to a mechanic. When you have plumbing issues you go to a plumber. When you want to buy or sell a house you go to a real estate agent. Leverage other professionals who are experts in their fields.

The second pitfall to avoid is doing willy-nilly marketing. This is what I refer to as going off in all directions. I'm currently working with a client who totally fits this profile. He was doing all kinds of things in the way of business development that took up a lot of time and weren't producing results.

When you do this without a plan and without being targeted, you will not get very good results. I advise my clients to follow what we have come to call a TST methodology—targeted, strategic and tactical. In order to get the best possible return for your investment of time, when you follow this approach you'll see greater results.

To re-focus, look at your target audience. Find out where they hang out. What associations do they belong to, and what events do they attend? What publications do they read? This is a little tougher when you are just starting out, but if you already have one or two clients in your target audience, you can simply ask them these questions. Be in front of people who have the ability to hire you or refer people to you.

### Build your referral network

I suggest areas to focus on: getting referrals from existing clients, and from other professionals. Don't be afraid to ask your clients when a file is finished or your work with them is completed for the names of other people who could benefit from your services. If they were happy with your work, there is no reason why they wouldn't want you to help someone they know.

Think about the various types of other professionals, accountants, financial planners, and real estate agents, and so on, that have the opportunity of being in front of your target market. Build relationships with them and try to provide reciprocal referrals to build loyalty. When you get a referral, send them a gift card to their favorite restaurant, or tickets to a sporting event with a handwritten thank-you card. Again, you want to encourage them to keep thinking of you.

Consider joining a referral group like BNI (Business Network International). I have several clients benefitting from going

to BNI. My advice is to try a few groups out, as they are not all equal. If BNI is too rigid for you, try BOB (Business over Breakfast). They are a little more relaxed with the rules.

Another approach is to create your own networking/mastermind group. I have a client right now who took this approach. Once a month, his best referral sources meet and not only discuss leads and referrals, but also discuss their businesses and issues they are facing.

The bottom line is to grow your network. That will lead to more clients.

*Gary Mitchell is principal at On Trac Coach where he works with lawyers, law clerks and paralegals across Canada helping them to attract more clients and grow their businesses. He is also co-founder of Legal A Team, a marketing and management alliance focused on providing big firm support to smaller law firms and solo practice lawyers and his second book, Raindance Two: A Blueprint for Growing your Practice is now available. He can be reached at gary@ontraccoach.com or 604-669-5235.*



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