

# Small Firm Business

IDEAS & INNOVATIONS FOR LAW FIRM MANAGEMENT • MAY/JUNE 2006



## Business Development

# Ready to Play

Hiring a business coach might help get you in the game.

By Paramjit Mahli

**Joel Webber's lunch meetings** were often an enjoyable part of his day: including impeccable service and fine cuisine. Yet, something was lacking. He wasn't regularly converting the mid-day conversations into new business. Though Webber, of five-attorney Couri & Couri in Chicago, is an avid reader of marketing books – he'd plowed through "Rainmaking Made Simple" – theory wasn't making its way into practice.

It wasn't until Webber began working with coach Deborah Knupp from Chicago-based Akini Corp. that he began to see the time spent over lunch trickle down to the bottom line. Coaching led to the realization, he says, that it's not about the number of stars a restaurant has, but it's about getting prospective clients engaged in a dialogue that leads to retaining him.

"Unquestionably, [coaching]

has made me a lot more comfortable at bringing in new business," says Webber. "I know where I can add value, and it's helped me be decisive."

Webber is by no means alone. To outpace competitors, small firm attorneys are increasingly seeking out ways to enhance their business development, marketing, and

sales skills. As part of their new training, many small firm attorneys are turning to business coaches for assistance. Professionals of all sorts are taking to coaching, and the industry has exploded in the last decade: It's estimated that there are more than 40,000 business coaches worldwide.

Business coaches lie some-

where on the continuum between marketing consultants and psychologists. All serve as confidants and provide counsel to their clients. To be clear, a coach can help attorneys build skills through the creation and practice of new habits. It's a long-term relationship whereby both parties work together to identify problems and determine how to address them. This is unlike a marketing consultant who, for instance, might help a law firm overhaul its marketing strategy. Such consultants provide their expertise and then generally leave their clients to implement the specifics of a plan.

"Two factors that make coaching successful are accountability and awareness," says New York City-based Shaun Smith, a coach with Action International, a coaching franchise. An effective coach holds clients accountable for taking the necessary steps to achieve their objectives, he says. What's more, they also provide the awareness, or unbiased observations, that can help clients begin to recognize what's in their blind spots.

### Taking action

For years, Candace Pollock of Cleveland-based Hahn & Pollock, a two-attorney firm specializing in estate planning and wills knew how, and in which areas, she wanted her practice to grow. But most of her efforts continued to be directed at managing the cases of her existing clients.

It was only after she began working with Steve Riley, of Tampa-based The Strategic Counsel, that she was

able to realize results. Riley helped her pinpoint the obstacle that had hindered previous well-intentioned

I have more ideas, am more creative, and find innovative ways to meet with clients."

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plans. And once Pollock set specific, measurable goals (which included hiring an intern to focus squarely on implementing her marketing plan), it was only a matter of time before improvements emerged. Since working with Riley, the estate-planning portion of her practice has expanded by 80 percent. And, she's been able to slash some overhead costs by identifying inefficiencies.

"The coaching was essential," says Pollock. "It forced me to look at the things that were not working in a new manner. As a direct result my income rose, my stress levels fell, and I had more free time." The cost? For a price tag of \$3,800, she attended a quarterly all-day workshop headed by Riley. At each session she was exposed to new tools and had the opportunity to reinforce previously acquired skills.

### Building a routine

Adam Reed, a senior associate with Dallas-based, 47-attorney Hermes Sargen Bates has seen improvement since he began working with a coach in September 2005. "Before, client development was scattered, a hit-and-miss situation," says Reed. "Now,

Reed started working with a coach by having an initial conversation about his specific career needs and goals. Immediately, client development objectives poked through to the forefront of Reed's career goals, and he began to incorporate breakfast meetings and active networking into his day-to-day routine. His coach

would regularly follow up with a telephone call to talk Reed through details of their plan, highlight accomplishments, and discuss any problems that may have arisen.

The intense information-gathering stage of the coaching exercise ended in December, three months after the initial meeting. Reed, however still interacts regularly with his coach who sends him resource materials on skill development and who makes himself available by phone for future problems or questions.

### Making the commitment

The time commitment required, and cost of working with a coach, can vary widely. Coaching relationships can run from a few months to a few years. As a result, you'll find programs that cost anywhere from a few hundred dollars to more than \$1,000 per month. It depends on the type of visit (one-on-one, group workshop, on-site or off-site visitation), and, the type of program (perhaps understandably, fast-track programs involving multiple meetings each month plus regular calls are most costly).

Both coaches and attorneys agree

that two of the biggest challenges to overcome when adding business development to a lawyer's daily grind are time and inclination. That's where a coaching program can help make a substantial

I can't replicate this kind of coaching myself. A lot of it is just discipline to force yourself to keep working at the things that don't come as naturally as drafting an argument might."

**"Attorneys need to know where their strengths and weaknesses lie, and be open to discussing them."**

difference, providing tools and a support system to encourage the attorney to get the job done.

Surprisingly, attorney cynicism hasn't been an issue for most of the coaches with whom we spoke. New York City-based coach Jane Cranston, who works with individual attorneys at both large and small firms, says their characteristic skepticism has not been an issue for her. Once the attorneys commit to a coaching program they tend to stick with it.

But it can be a challenge to maintain peak performance after weekly meetings with the coach become a thing of the past. "It's funny, at the gym I don't hire a trainer," says Webber, "but for some reason in the professional environment

No matter how the arrangement is structured, coaches and attorneys agree that what's most important for successful coaching is a rapport, a high comfort level, between attorney and coach. After all, some discussions will be of a personal nature. Attorneys need to know where their strengths and weaknesses lie, and be open to discussing them with a coach.

One final bit of coaching advice for small firm lawyers: "Carve out time now for strategic planning," says Riley. "If you don't do it today, you won't do it tomorrow."

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## Coaching Credentials

Finding a suitable coach requires the same due diligence that you might perform to hire any other professional. As a starting point you might ask colleagues for referrals. But in the end, here's what you should ask of a potential coach:

1. What is the quality of the coach's education? Does the coach have clinical therapy qualifications?
2. What sort of formal coaching training does the person have? This is an unregulated field, so do the necessary research (see "Coach Check," below).
3. What is the nature of the candidate's professional experience? Is it applicable to your needs?
4. How long has the person been coaching, and what life experience do they have that might be important to assist you?
5. Is the coach affiliated with a coaching franchise, or work independently?
6. Does the candidate use a standard coaching method, or can the coach's approach be modified to meet your specific needs?
7. Would you feel comfortable working with this person? Make sure there is a personal match.

— P.M.

## Coach Check

Sources to review credentials

- International Business Coach Institute  
[www.cambridgenetwork.co.uk](http://www.cambridgenetwork.co.uk)
- International Coach Federation  
[www.coachfederation.org/ICFI](http://www.coachfederation.org/ICFI)
- The Coaches Training Institute  
[www.thecoaches.com/](http://www.thecoaches.com/)
- Worldwide Association of Business Coaches  
[www.wabccoaches.com/](http://www.wabccoaches.com/)