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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

Female Attorneys: Here's How To Make It Rain

By **Erin Coe**

Law360, San Diego (February 25, 2014, 10:11 PM ET) -- Female attorneys face institutional and personal challenges to becoming rainmakers at their law firms, but experts say that by developing potential clients early in their careers, zeroing in on a niche focus, and initiating changes at their firms over inheriting and taking credit for work, they can set themselves on a path to build a hefty book of business.

According to a National Association of Women Lawyers survey of the 200 largest U.S. firms **released Tuesday**, female lawyers continued to struggle to climb up the ranks to leadership positions, with 64 percent occupying the lowest position as staff attorneys and 17 percent of women occupying the highest position as equity partners. Forty-four percent of firms viewed women's perceived lack of business development as the top reason why the number of female equity partners has remained nearly static over the past eight years.

Women also were found to still lag behind men when it comes to credit for rainmaking and client revenue. Among the largest 100 firms, women were credited for about 80 percent of the client billings credited to men, while among the second hundred firms, women were credited with 89 percent, according to the survey.

Female lawyers also tend to want to come to the office to do their jobs and then go home, but becoming a rainmaker often requires extra work on top of an already busy schedule, according to Deborah Froling, president of NAWL and a partner of Arent Fox LLP.

"If you have the option of going out to lunch or a cocktail party, and that means you will get home later, women are more reluctant to do that," she said. "They don't always think in the long-term about what those opportunities will eventually reap because they are not immediate. Cultivating relationships takes time."

But female attorneys who stay focused only on the billable hours and the day-to-day tasks that need to get done may end up finding that while they are serving their firm and their clients, they are doing a disservice to themselves, according to Karen Kahn, managing partner of Threshold Advisors LLC.

"Ultimately, having a book of business allows you to have independence, allows you to have an impact on others and allows you to be indulgent," she said.

Here, experts share five steps female attorneys can take on the road to becoming a rainmaker:

Build Your Network Early

Froling speaks from experience when she advises attorneys to start early in their career to develop contacts so that they have a solid base when it comes time to ask for clients. After working for three years for the government and for five years at a BigLaw firm, she became

counsel at another firm only to realize that she had always been fed clients from her previous firm and that she needed to start going out and getting her own clients.

Attorneys need a year or two just to focus on learning how to be a good lawyer before they can start to work on becoming a rainmaker, but in the meantime, they should keep up with their contacts from law school, college and individuals in their community.

"Maintaining a network is something you certainly can do," Froling said. "A 25-year-old straight out of law school should continue to stay in touch with classmates from law school because they are going to go on and do different things — some may go in-house, while others may go into the government or a small or big practice."

Rainmaking is all about building relationships, and lawyers should keep in mind that developing a network is not a race, but a marathon.

"The biggest lesson I've learned is that it just takes time," Froling said. "You can't just be absent for eight years and then decide to reach out to an old contact just because he or she became general counsel of a company."

Consider Your End Goal

Kahn likes to ask attorneys to envision what a fabulous career would like for them, and then to work backwards from that objective. If attorneys just start going to networking events and seminars at random without having a well thought-out strategy, they are going to end up exhausted and frustrated, she said.

"Would you really love to be a solo practitioner or work in a smaller firm or in-house? Do you want to work from home more or do you want to travel more? Do you want to be able to impact younger lawyers and the industry?" she asked. "Most women aren't thinking about what's important to them, but they need to know what their goals are."

Attorneys should also identify their strengths in developing business and whether there are some areas that could use some improvement, according to Brett Axelrod, managing partner of Fox Rothschild LLP's Las Vegas office and a member on the firm's executive committee.

"Are you good at cold calling or are you better at nurturing a strategic partnership?" she said. "Are you comfortable working a room or do you like bringing someone else with you to feed off their energy? Figure out what kind of a lawyer you are, where you are lacking and educate yourself to bridge that gap."

Froling said there is not one way to become a rainmaker, and each attorney has to find the path that works best for her.

"I go to an industry group conference twice a year where I know about 650 of 700 [attendees], and I go around and talk to them all," she said. "Probably 90 percent of people think that's worse than having their fingernails ripped off, but that's what works for me and the way I am. Everybody has to find what works for their personality and practice."

Find a Niche

Attorneys who can develop their practice expertise in a particular industry or niche area are going to have a higher likelihood of success in bringing in business because they will be building relationships with contacts they see on a regular basis and leveraging their industry-specific knowledge over time, according to Kahn.

"It doesn't necessarily help if you're a bankruptcy, antitrust, white collar or appellate lawyer, but typically in most practice areas, an industry focus works really well," she said.

Kahn said there are four relationship buckets that attorneys should consider when putting together an effective business development strategy: relationships inside the firm, past and current clients, personal and professional contacts and an industry or geographic focus. If an attorney is looking to become an expert in the fashion sector, going to networking events where individuals from the fashion industry are present might become a part of one's to-do list.

"It helps give attorneys a clearer focus about what they want to talk about and where they want to go," she said.

When meeting a potential client, attorneys should spend less time talking about themselves and their firms and more time finding out about a contact's interests, needs and challenges in order to assess in what instances a potential client may need legal assistance, according to Kahn.

"Lawyers need to look for opportunities to provide help for others," Froling said. "They need to find circumstances where they can help someone look good in front of their boss or send someone an article on a topic their company has been struggling with."

In looking for potential clients, female attorneys also need to grow more comfortable with the notion of mixing business with pleasure, according to Lauren Stiller Rikleen, president of Rikleen Institute for Strategic Leadership and executive-in-resident at Boston College Center for Work & Family.

"Women have a tendency to segment their work relationships, personal relationships and their relationships at their children's schools instead of thinking strategically about crossing those boundaries," she said. "Men are more comfortable looking at all of their relationships as potential sources of business in a positive way. Often women are not comfortable asking a friend for business, but friends and community acquaintances can be incredible sources of business."

Get Out of the Office

Attorneys who invest time and money into going to industry conferences and other networking events are putting themselves in a better position to know where they can add value by learning the key players in a sector and understanding potential clients' companies and jobs, according to Froling.

Froling, a securities and real estate lawyer, said she typically finds clients by attending industry conferences but also develops her book of business by participating in American Bar Association groups, writing about recently passed legislation, working the phones and asking contacts out to lunch.

"For the most part, sitting in your office is not going to get you clients," she said. "I'm a sports nut, but for a lot of women, they don't like to go out to hockey, football or golf games. There are other things they can do, such as taking clients to a theater event or a museum opening. ... Whatever you do, you have to be authentic and do what's comfortable for you. If you're going to an event and you're absolutely miserable, everyone will know that."

Attorneys need to make marketing part of a routine, just like brushing their teeth or working out, according to Axelrod. She said she had decided to make business development a priority during a yoga class in 1999, when she told herself that she was going to "dare to get out of my own way and see what I could actually do."

"I read every book out of Harvard Business School on sales, and I went through my Rolodex

and cleaned up who was a keeper and not a keeper," she said. "I made phone calls, gave clients Starbucks cards, invited them to galas and sent them articles on their industries. I made that investment."

In addition, she founded a networking forum for professional women who work in Chapter 11 bankruptcy called Chapter Chicks that meets monthly and refers work among its members to help develop their books of business.

"I see a lot of women at the end of the workday want to go home and be with their husbands and children and have their lives, but to be a rainmaker, you have to give up some of your personal life to bring in big business," she said.

Push for Changes at Your Firm

While there are many actions female lawyers can take to build their book of business, it is equally critical that firms take steps to help foster more female rainmakers, according to Rikleen.

Successful rainmakers are not just the lawyers who bring in work, but those who have been given books of business from retiring partners and business generation credits from senior colleagues. Unfortunately, male attorneys tend to benefit more from inherited business than female attorneys. Firms should develop systems that create a more level playing field by ensuring a fair process for inheriting client work, according to Rikleen.

"In most firms, retiring partners drive the decision, but why shouldn't client preferences be involved, along with the firm's institutional concerns as to what is best for the firm and the growth and development of its talent?" she said.

In addition, firms should improve how credit for work is distributed and recognized, according to Rikleen. Although many partners may go out to pitch for new work, some firms have systems that only allow one billing attorney to get credit, or one attorney may insist on full credit even if sharing is possible, which can lead to infighting among lawyers who worked on the pitch, she said.

"If the firm has no institutional mechanism for fair sharing or distribution of credit, it becomes the survival of the fittest in which the person most willing to argue for credit is rewarded," she said. "That makes for some awkward and unpleasant discussions. Instead, firms should have more institutional structures governing how credit is shared and work is inherited."

Female attorneys can get the discussion rolling in their firm by using their women's initiatives to look at their firm's own data on who is inheriting work and earning credit for new business as well as to develop strategies for a fairer system.

"Compared to major accounting firms and other professional service organizations, law firms are behind where the rest of the world is on these issues," Rikleen said. "Firms have to change if they are going to be competitive and survive, and to retain talent and develop future leaders, they are going to have to address these issues."

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