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MOVING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK

Solo Can Grow Business By Using Personal Touch

By **RENEE C. BERMAN**

In 2009, people lost homes, lost jobs and lost hope.

The *National Law Journal* reported that in the past year, the 250 largest law firms across the country laid off more than 5,000 attorneys. The economic crisis has devoured our financial security and has emboldened many attorneys to take the plunge into entrepreneurship. Both those who have just taken the plunge into solo practice and those who have long grappled with the struggles and triumphs of self-employment are faced with the challenge of keeping up with technology effectively and cost-efficiently; however, sometimes the old ways are the best ways.

Technology has invaded our lives and our law practices, but not all for the better. I have a bookcase filled with my favorite books. The pages are yellowed and the cor-

obsolete and bookshelves will be filled with nothing more than dust collecting knick knacks.

Twitter. Facebook. LinkedIn. Blogging. Social Media. All are words and phrases that did not exist during the days when school children needed to go to libraries to write science reports. The question is not whether a computer can be found in a home but rather how many computers or laptops are found within a single home.

Most people spend hours every day staring at the glowing screen and typing on the slightly worn keypads both at work



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page does not mean you are actually of any significance to these people.

Staying Relevant

While some attorneys are clinging with a white-knuckled grip to the former marketing ways of a time long gone, most acknowledge, even if they do not like, the rainmaking ways of today.

The goal of marketing is to keep yourself and your business in the forefront of the minds of potential clients and peers so that they think of you and only you when they need an attorney to retain or refer a matter. Irrefutably, solo and small firm practitioners need to embrace some of the marketing gems of this technology laden society; however, I suspect the solo practitioner's marketing efforts are actually being diluted when technology is the only strategy used to market their practice.

Technology has weakened the building and maintaining of relationships. Face-to-face meetings, phone calls and handwritten notes are slowly fading, and the quickest (and unknowingly least effective) approach is becoming the norm. Making eye contact while you explain to your client the consequences of his conduct is always more effective than an e-mail where tone cannot be determined and often is misinterpreted. Likewise, when you communicate solely through your keypad, important relationships wane and you fail to make new connections – not just contacts, but rather lasting connections.

Isn't building lasting connections, oth-

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IRREFUTABLY, SOLO AND SMALL FIRM PRACTITIONERS NEED TO EMBRACE SOME OF THE MARKETING GEMS OF THIS TECHNOLOGY-LADEN SOCIETY; HOWEVER, I SUSPECT THE SOLO PRACTITIONER'S MARKETING EFFORTS ARE ACTUALLY BEING DILUTED WHEN TECHNOLOGY IS THE ONLY STRATEGY USED TO MARKET THEIR PRACTICE.

ners creased. The bindings are broken and split. Each book is treasured for the journey found within the weathered pages.

The popularity of Kindle, the wireless reading device, is harrowing. To read a book without the book is an example of technology gone astray. Soon bookstores will be

and at home. People now use Facebook as they once used the telephone. As contact lists grew, the quality of relationships deteriorated. While your expanding list of "friends" on Facebook may make you feel popular, it is doing little for your business. The number of "friends" on your Facebook



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erwise known as your referral base, what building your business is all about?

In an era of text messaging and online socializing, technology is making leaps and bounds forward, but I think people are looking back to more authentic modes of communication.

How often do we ask a client how the family is or how they are feeling through an e-mail? While e-mail is used to quickly communicate with the client so that you can complete your expanding task list, by using this mode of communication, you are also removing any personal element of that communication.

Notice how a face-to-face meeting begins with small talk first before you get down to business. How's the family? Your health? Your golf game? The client feels like more than just a number. He or she feels like their attorney is listening to his or her concerns. A client that feels like they are be-

ing heard is usually a happier client and one more likely to pass your name along to their friends and co-workers. On the other hand, the client who receives just a few sentences in his or her e-mail account every couple of weeks is the client who feels like he or she is just another fee in their attorney's pocket. No relationship built now. No referrals later.

Real Communication

Networking is a targeted strategy that can grow your business like a strong word-of-mouth campaign. While it is easier and quicker to pay somebody to optimize your web site's online presence than it is to make phone calls every week to those within your networking circle, in the long run, the relationships you build on the ground will grow your business far greater than an expensive content-saturated and video-infused web site. It's amazing how powerful real com-

munication can be in a society that has succumbed to doing everything the easy way, including speaking to each other.

Perhaps, for the solo practitioner, spending less on marketing is simply a matter of spending more time on networking efforts the way it was done before even our telephones jumped on the bandwagon of communicating non-verbally.

Listening and connecting with people builds relationships and makes rain. Yes, it requires effort and time, but your output is directly proportional to your input. If your input includes your sincerest self, then your output may be referrals, recommendations, friendships, budding reputations and new opportunities in 2010 and beyond.

And for those who have put one of those wireless reading devices on their holiday wish list, remember, reading in the bath may now be detrimental to your health. ■