

# 30 Tips to a Successful Solo Practice

By Renée Bauer

Give Back

Build Relationships with Other Professionals

Do Not Forget Client Is the King

Stay Positive

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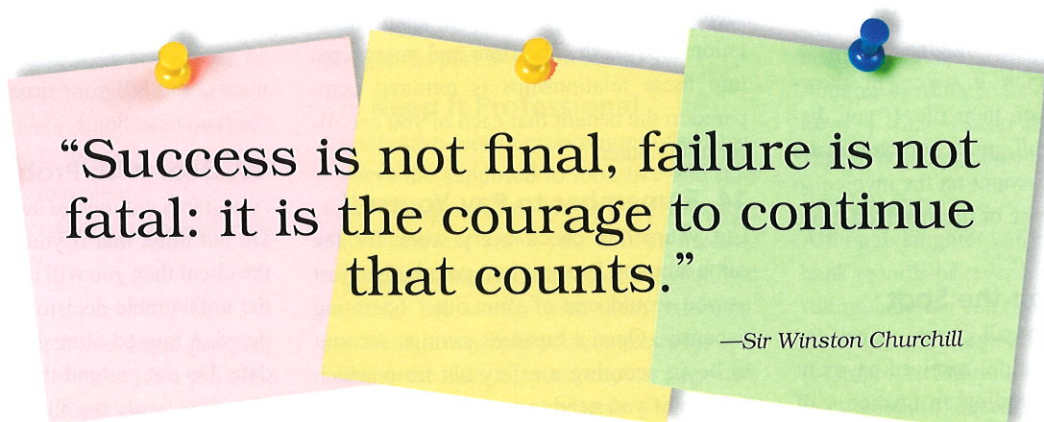
When Things Get Tough Keep Going

Learn from Mistakes

Keep It Professional

Be Prepared





“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”

—Sir Winston Churchill

There is no magic formula or secret to building a successful practice, but rather it is built upon perseverance, dedication, and passion for personal and professional fulfillment. The following are tips—some practical, some philosophical—as you embark on the journey of entrepreneurship. While some tips are exclusive to the legal profession and some tips are exclusive to the business owner, others are just words of encouragement as you plunge into the exhilarating experience of starting your own business. Adversely, common mistakes that attorneys make can be so severe as to be the demise of their practice. Sometimes the mistakes are intentional, but more often than not, they are the result of unintentional conduct due to poor office management.

As stated by Confucius, “Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

### **1. When Things Get Tough, Keep Going**

No one learns to ride a bike without earning a couple minor scars. When you first learned to ride, you fell over and over again. You scraped your knee and shed a few tears, but you got up, brushed yourself off, and tried again until you eventually learned how to keep the bike upright and cruise around the driveway on your own. Look at your new practice through the eyes of a six-year-old learning to ride a bike. Instead of giving up when you hit a bump in the road, learn from each bump, dust yourself off, and keep going.

### **2. Be Confident in Your Abilities**

If you are confident in your abilities, then others, whether they are clients, opposing

counsel, or judges, will listen a little closer to what you have to say. Do not let more experienced attorneys intimidate you just because they have more years under their belts. You are an attorney just as they are and your voice can be just as strong. Body language speaks volumes about your confidence level so stand up straight, speak clearly, and maintain eye contact. When you fidget, lower your eyes, mumble, and hunch your shoulders, you are telling the other person, loudly and clearly, that he or she should doubt your abilities and what you are saying. Even if you don't feel confident, fake it.

### **3. Don't Compare Yourself to Others**

Our egos can create inner turmoil. If you are constantly comparing yourself, your business, and your client book to others, you allow the world around you to control how you feel about yourself. Rather than compare yourself to your colleague in the shared office space, compare yourself to yourself. Look at how much you have accomplished and how you have grown as an attorney, business owner, and individual. It is harder to acknowledge your own self-worth than it is to compare yourself to everyone else, but once you do, you will feel more inner peace, personal power, and positive energy in your life.

### **4. Stay Educated**

If there was a new medical treatment available to treat an illness you have, wouldn't you want your doctor to know about it, as well as its risks and benefits? Likewise, you should stay abreast of new laws by attending continuing legal education classes. Instructors usually provide their contact information to attendees, so this is another good way to build a core network of attorneys

whom you can call upon with questions.

### **5. Always Be Straightforward, Communicative, and Ethical.**

The reputation you build in this profession will remain with you for the duration of your career. Clients will appreciate straightforward communication as well as prompt and responsive communication. In the same respect, do not make promises that you cannot keep. Never promise a particular outcome and do not promise to do something for a client if you know you will not have time this week to accomplish that task. Remember, happy clients may never mention your name to anyone, but unhappy clients will spit your name to everyone they know.

### **6. Be Frugal**

One lucrative month does not mean a pass to splurge. Do not make expensive personal or business expenditures just because you had a couple profitable months. The subsequent months could just as easily be slow. Expand your business slowly and intelligently; that is, only after your budget is reviewed, analyzed, and revised to fit your future plans.

### **7. Do Not Take It Personally**

Clients sometimes are unhappy with us. It is the nature of the business. You need to be your client's effective advocate, not a best friend. Sometimes that means telling your client things that are hard to hear. It is far worse to expect success and walk away disappointed than to be prepared for the worst and walk away satisfied with the outcome.

### **8. Send out Invoices on Time, All the Time.**

Clients will not call you to ask if they owe you money. If you do not send out monthly invoices, your chances of getting paid are slim. It is easier to get a client to pay smaller



monthly bills than a large bill that has accumulated over several months. Likewise, clients will appreciate a statement showing the time spent on their file. If you discounted the bill at all, make sure you make a notation of the discount on the invoice so the client feels like he or her received more for their money.

### **9. Put Clients on the Spot**

Do not be afraid to call clients to ask for payment. If you have not received payment within 30 days of sending an invoice, call the client on day 31. Often a personal phone call will shame a client into paying his or her bill. If you simply resend the bill, the client will likely slip it into the kitchen junk drawer where your previous bill still sits.

### **10. Act with Integrity**

It is possible to have a thriving practice while also maintaining your core values. Integrity is everything. If your client asks you to do something you are not comfortable with, explain that in written correspondence. As an attorney, you are not a puppet and your client the puppeteer. When you allow a client unfettered control of a case, your reputation and—in extreme cases—your license are at stake. You worked hard to earn that “esq.” tailing your name. Treat it with the respect it deserves.

### **11. Acknowledge Your Flaws**

It's important to recognize your flaws, so you can address them. Attorneys who appreciate their shortcomings can be sure that these flaws never become a hindrance to productivity or the demise of their practice.

### **12. Be Prepared**

There is no excuse for lack of preparation. Ever. Always show up for court on time and prepared. Bring copies of motions and briefs to court in case the court cannot locate the copy that was filed. Know the facts of your case and know your client. Attention to detail is a trait that sets a great attorney apart from a mediocre attorney.

### **13. Build Relationships with Other Professionals**

Bankers, accountants, financial advisors, physicians, chiropractors, realtors—they can all be a good referral source. Maintain regular contact with these people so that when the times come, they remember you. Send personal notes, plan lunch meetings, pick up the phone to say hello. Once you

identify a network of contacts, keep the relationships fresh. The time and energy put into these relationships is minimal compared to the benefit that each of you can offer to the other.

### **14. Remember to Pay Yourself**

Cut yourself a check every week for the same amount. Factor it into your budget just as you would one of your other operating expenses. Open a business savings account to begin accruing a safety net from which to draw if you need to cover expenses or to assure that you are paid each week.

### **15. Toot Your Own Horn**

Whether you want to believe it or not, you are a salesperson. You must sell your services to every potential new client. You must make the new client believe that you are the knowledgeable, competent, and passionate attorney that you actually are.

### **16. Write Everything Down**

You cannot remember everything. You will be thankful you documented every phone conversation if you are ever grieved. You may recall that you spoke to a particular client every other day for three months, but if you did not keep track of these phone conversations, you will not be able to produce a phone log to dispute the client's assertion that you rarely returned her phone calls.

### **17. Be Social**

Join associations, volunteer for membership committees, and then attend events held by these groups. The associations do not need to be strictly professional. By joining a book club, you can network with people whom you may have never met otherwise. Volunteering for a community fundraiser may help foster relationships outside of your professional circle. Join a cycling group because you relish the time outdoors. You will be surprised how many referrals you will get just by doing something you enjoy with people whose company you enjoy.

### **18. Adapt to Change**

You must either change with times or be left behind. When your local court starts implementing e-filing, use it. Although Internet marketing has not entirely replaced more traditional advertising, it can be a significant source of client contact. Have a Web site designed by a professional and blog regularly. Technology allows greater freedom from your office. Get a hand-held de-

vice and sync it with your office computer, so you can receive e-mails, make appointments, and bill your time when you are on the road or at home.

### **19. Deal with Problems**

A problem will not go away if you ignore it. Do not think that if you avoid calling back the client then you will not need to tell about the unfavorable decision that the court rendered. A missed filing date is a missed filing date. Do not pretend that it did not happen. You must notify the client as soon as you realize your mistake. Problems will only fester and grow, so deal with them immediately to put them behind you and move on.

### **20. Be Humble**

Just because you can stand in the “attorney's only” line when walking into a courthouse, does not mean you are better than anybody else. You worked hard to get through law school but many people work hard in their jobs. Your job does not make you more important than the next person. Treat people with respect and be grateful for those who put their faith in you. They are the people who give you a reason to go into work every day.

### **21. Fight Procrastination**

Procrastination is a mechanism for coping with the anxiety or stress of completing a task or making a decision. When one procrastinates, it typically results in additional stress, guilt, and loss of productivity. These feelings can promote further procrastination until the individual has no choice but to deal with the task at hand, at which point the stress and anxiety to complete such task is that much more heightened. Why put yourself through all of that? Just do what needs to be done as soon as it crosses your desk. The best way to deal with boring or routine tasks is to do them one after another. One you get started, you will move quickly from one task to another, and at the end of an hour, you will feel like you accomplished something.

### **22. Learn from Mistakes**

You can only learn from your own mistakes by actually admitting that you made a mistake to begin with. Do not blame others for something you did or did not do. Owning your mistake moves you towards understanding why it was made and what can be done to avoid a repeat occurrence. Mistakes and negative experiences can sometimes



be even better than successes, because you have an opportunity to learn something that a success could never teach you. Whenever you have a negative experience or made a mistake, ask yourself: What is the learning opportunity in this experience? Challenges make you a stronger attorney. Losses make you a wiser attorney.

### 23. Give Back

Take one to two pro bono cases per year. Most state bar associations have a pro bono program that will screen cases and filter them to willing attorneys. As a new attorney, these cases will afford you the opportunity to start "practicing." As a more seasoned attorney, you might be reminded of the ideals that sent you to law school to begin with. As attorneys, we have a skill that should be shared equally, no matter an individual's income level. Realistically, you have a business to run and you need to make money. I am not lecturing to commit half of your practice to pro bono work, but rather, if we each take one or two cases a year, that is a lot of people we are helping just by donating our time.

### 24. Make Decisions and Commit to Them

Making a decision implies that there are alternative choices to be considered. Very few decisions are made with absolute certainty, so all involve some element of risk. When faced with a decision, identify the available options and choose the one that best fits with your goals, business needs, or case strategy. The goal is to make a logical and unemotional business decision, then move on.

### 25. Stay Positive

Take control of your attitude. If you think negatively, negative events will occur. Remember today is just a day, the week is just a week, the month is just a month. What is stressful to you today will be forgotten tomorrow. Try to remember the good, rather than focus on the bad, as we so often do in our lives.

### 26. Do Not Forget Your Client Is the Client

In our role as attorneys, it is easy to lose sight of what a good result means. What it means to an attorney may be very different than what it means to our client. It is not always about winning. It is about creating the best possible situation that our client can

live with at the end of the day. Compromise is often the port to such a result.

### 27. Keep It Professional

Clients have certain expectations of what attorneys are supposed to look like and how they are supposed to act. Dress professionally when you know you will be meeting with clients. Refrain from sharing your own personal life stories with them. Although you think it may help you connect with your clients, the fact is, your clients only care about their problems and only want to talk about their problems, especially if they are paying you by the hour.

### 28. Be Proud

Take pride in your practice. Everything that leaves your office, whether it is a letter, a pleading, or a voice message is a reflection of you. Do not allow yourself to get sloppy with your work product. So long as you are proud of your practice, you will strive to offer reliable, effective, and quality representation and as a result, you will watch your business thrive over time.

### 29. Be Patient

It may seem like your phone will never ring again. Have faith and then get active. You never know when you will meet your next client, so use slow time to increase your networking efforts. Attend more chamber events, more association meetings, more happy hours. Every new hand that you

shake might turn into a business lead. It could take years of struggle before you are running a profitable business, but if you believe in what you do and focus on serving your clients, your business will grow.

### 30. Laugh

Although laughter will not reconcile your bank records or reverse a court's adverse ruling, laughter can (a) improve mental functioning, (b) exercise and relax muscles, (c) improve respiration, (d) stimulate circulation, (e) decrease stress hormones, (f) increase the immune system's defenses, (g) increase pain threshold and tolerance, and (h) increase personal satisfaction. Most of the things you worry about will probably never become a reality, and what seems like a huge problem today you may not even remember a few years from now. So relax a little, lighten up a little, and laugh a little. **CL**

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*Attorney Renée C. Bauer practices family law in Hamden, Connecticut. This article is excerpted from her book, The Ultimate Guide to Solo and Small Firm Success, published by LawFirst Publishing, a division of the Connecticut Bar Association. Her book is available on amazon.com and from the CBA at (860)223-4400.*

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