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Monday, July 27, 2009

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Operating A Solo Practice By The Book

Attorney's how-to guide takes on client sob stories and other issues

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

There's a saying that serves as common advice for first-time authors: Write what you know. Hamden attorney Renée C. Berman has plenty of knowledge about setting up and maintaining a solo law practice, after she made the move in September 2007.

So with her life's ambition being to do more creative writing, she found a perfect blend of topic and opportunity as she developed her business based on trial and error and sought advice from business professionals.

Berman's debut book, "The Ultimate Guide to Solo and Small Firm Success," was released last month and published by the Connecticut Bar Association.

The book focuses on the nuts and bolts of what it takes to open and operate a law practice. When she was opening her solo family law practice, she found a dearth of helpful resources.

"Most of the books discussed how to run a law firm as a lawyer and not as a business person," Berman, 32, said last week. "The message [in 'The Ultimate Guide...'] is you need to continually evaluate and re-evaluate your business. You're wearing many hats as an attorney and business person."

Before writing the book, Berman spent time talking to business development professionals, such as Web developers and accountants, some who helped her with her start-up. And when she informally surveyed multiple attorneys who started a solo practice before shutting it down, she found a common thread that she believed her book could address.

"They had no problems with their lawyering skills," Berman said, "but they had problems managing their business."

Measuring Up

In the book, Berman outlines the how-tos of flying solo. She covers purchasing office supplies and computers, finding billing software that best fits a small practice, and marketing solo practices through personal networking and a Web presence.

Marketing "can be the biggest financial drain on small firms," Berman said. "You have to figure out how to get the most bang for your buck."

Berman also tackles accounting issues that she overlooked when her business was in its initial stages, such as the importance of setting up a savings account separate from clients' and operating accounts in order to pay taxes.

One of the more humorous tips is a simple one—measure your office. Berman recounts how she excitedly purchased the perfect desk and scheduled delivery right before she was to open her office. Problem was, the desk was too big to fit through the door.

"For the first month, I worked on a folding table," Berman said. "A lot of the book came from running my own firm, what worked and what didn't."

One of her favorite chapters discusses the challenges of being taken seriously as an entrepreneurial female attorney. Part of that involves standing firm when it comes to charging for legal services.



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Hamden family law attorney Renée Berman, author of "The Ultimate Guide to Solo and Small Firm Success," said solos get into trouble when they start taking cases outside their areas of expertise.



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"More times than not, I find female attorneys are giving their time without billing," said Berman. The same applies to discounting rates. "I've fallen into that," Berman noted. "You hear people's sob stories and sometimes you discount the rates from the very beginning. You have to stick to your guns."

The book focuses on client management, too, such as how to retain clients and how to avoid malpractice lawsuits. Berman said solo attorneys start to get in trouble when they begin taking on cases on topics that they aren't comfortable with.

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That's especially true in the current economic climate. "Some solos are taking on those cases because they need the work when they should be refocusing their marketing strategy for their niche practice," Berman said. "If you go outside of your niche practice, that's where the grievances start coming in."

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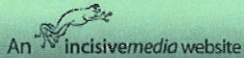
Berman noted that there's another element of good timing with her book's release.

"This is a time when jobs are unstable," she said. "It's a time when I've heard a lot of attorneys contemplating opening their own firm."

The book is available through the CBA and amazon.com. The CBA sells it for \$25 for members and \$29 for non-members. Meanwhile, the bar association is setting up speaking and book signing engagements for Berman at law libraries and other locations.

All of it has been a whirlwind for Berman. Based on some articles she wrote for the CBA's magazine, she was approached about writing the book, which she completed in about four months. The CBA wanted the 213-page manuscript in time to have it ready for last month's annual meeting. "There were a lot of sleepless nights," said Berman.

Not unlike the first weeks and months of running her own law practice. She acknowledges the inherent risks of an entrepreneurial move, but she has no regrets. "No one goes into opening a business without nerves and anxiety," Berman said. "But if you make every decision based on a thought process and not on emotion, it can be a success." •



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