



LAW OFFICE

You Can Make It On Your Own Hanging Your Shingle as a New Attorney

By Gregory J. Calabrese

The second semester for third-year law students has been an uneasy one in recent years. Not only do third-year students have to concern themselves with the Multistate Professional Responsibility Examination, State Bar applications, and studying for and taking their respective bar exams, but lately, the rate of employment of recent law graduates has been staggeringly low. The statistics are a shock to students who enter law school with ambitions of obtaining financially stable careers upon graduating. Unfortunately, the reality that recent graduates have faced and continue to face is a mountain of debt and limited employment options. I faced this dilemma just three short years ago.

During my third year, I sent out résumé after résumé and cover letter after cover letter trying to find an employer who would even call me for an interview. Halfway through my final semester of law school, I learned about the job market for new attorneys and decided to change the way I was looking for employment. I simply stopped my search. Instead, I seriously contemplated “hanging my own shingle” and starting my own practice. As I considered my decision, I spoke with countless attorneys, professors, self-employed business owners, family, and friends and asked for their thoughts and, eventually, their advice. Three years and a lot of hard work, stress, a little luck, and countless gallons of coffee later, I can reflect on that process and my decision to open my own practice and say that it was the best decision I’ve ever made.

Deciding to open my own practice did not come without its fair share of difficulties, however, not the least of which was the steep learning curve that any new lawyer must face. There were also the basic questions that any newly self-employed individual must answer: What should I do about an office? How much overhead am I going to have? How should I manage my schedule? What networking opportunities should I pursue? How do I sell my services to potential clients? Most importantly, though, I needed to figure out how I was going to obtain a client base to sustain my practice.

The initial struggles were substantial. I remember the first time I heard the word “praecipe” and sounding foolish when I had to ask my suitemate what one was. At that time, I had just been retained by one of my first clients to handle his child custody dispute. I knew how to draft a motion and proof of service, but when the court rejected my submission for lacking a praecipe, I was dumbfounded. I knew how naïve I was, so I wasn’t completely ashamed of having to ask what a praecipe was, but I did not want to seem like I was completely unprepared to practice law on my own. Since that day, that suitemate has acted as my mentor, and his advice on practicing law and running a business has been invaluable.

Certainly, I have discussed this exact topic with many attorneys who voiced concerns about my not necessarily being prepared to practice law on my own. Admittedly, my most obvious struggle was with the actual substantive practice of law. Whereas many new attorneys have a

seasoned attorney within their firms to advise them, I did not. I had to rely on my own research and the benevolence of the few attorneys and judges I knew and trusted to offer the legal advice I needed—and still, to a lesser extent, continue to rely on. Knowing what I didn't know forced me to consult with those attorneys and judges in addition to conducting my own research on areas of the law with which I was not completely familiar. Even now, I spend more time than almost any other attorney I know researching various issues to ensure I am at least as educated as my opposing counsel with regard to a given issue and to avoid committing malpractice.

As any new business owner knows, there is an inherent risk to being self-employed. Every business and individual is different. One person may not have any student loans or debt, no spouse or significant other, and no children. Another may have all those things. No matter what, the risk is still substantial. The question I forced myself to answer was, How long am I willing to take this risk before I decide whether the continued risk is worth taking?

My decision was ultimately based on a rather simple thought process. I deduced that as a new law school graduate and State Bar candidate at age 25, I would still be an employable young attorney no matter how long I waited to decide whether continuing with my new practice was worthwhile. I realized that if I was not able to provide myself with an income, I wouldn't be able to sustain my practice long enough to become a less attractive candidate for employment with another firm or company as a result of my experience or, depending on the length of time, lack thereof.

A successful businessman I have known for several years once told me, "Self-employment is full of peaks and valleys. You have to extend the peaks long enough to be able to ride out the valleys." Of course, his advice specifically pertained to one of the first questions I asked him about dealing with the ever-present concern of not necessarily knowing when or where his next source of income would appear. Not surprisingly, this is a concern fellow debt-riddled recent graduates have asked me about and one that, not unlike most other small business owners, I continue to have. Financially, hanging my own shingle was a significant burden. Thankfully, it was a burden worth undertaking.

I continue to take countless risks by maintaining my own law practice, but it comes with endless rewards. The most important thing I learned throughout my years in the educational system was to find a way to get paid to do something you love that makes you happy. I find that, no matter how many hours I work in a given week, the time constraints and requirements I put on myself are easier to handle than those that otherwise would be given to me by a superior. Although I work during traditional business hours—and frequently well beyond them—I am able to choose those hours. I have the freedom to accept

or decline cases, I make all the strategic decisions pertaining to my cases, and, not to be ignored, I retain the fees earned in a given case.

During the last several years, my aforementioned mentor and I have had the opportunity—graciously provided to us by a professor for whom we have the utmost respect—to present to second- and third-year law students the idea of starting a solo law practice as a new attorney. The professor does not make the students aware of the nature of our presentation ahead of time, which allows us to take the students by surprise. The consistent reaction we receive from these students year after year is they are unaware that starting their own firm is even an option. Admittedly, it was this presentation, originally given solely by my mentor, that started me down this path.

Just like that first presentation I sat through, we allow a lot of time for questions from the students. Without exception, the first question we are asked concerns how we find and retain clients. My answer to the students and anyone else who may inquire is always the same: it is through a combination of effective networking, targeted marketing, exceptional customer service, and a little bit of luck. The connections I have made through various bar association events, charity events, networking groups, religious and service organizations, and general community involvement have been and continue to be my best source of business. A majority of inquirers are shocked to hear that response because they cannot believe it is that simple.

A very knowledgeable professor once told me, "Having a license to practice law is like having a front row seat to the greatest show on earth for the rest of your life." In fact, he made that statement almost weekly. At the time, I thought I knew what he meant. In hindsight after several years of practicing law, I think I am finally beginning to understand what he meant. Just like a movie, television show, or play, I believe it is how you connect with what you're watching that determines how enjoyable you find it. As a young solo practitioner, I continue to enjoy the show in which my license allows me to actively participate. Although my choice was the right one for me, hanging your own shingle is not for everyone. However, new attorneys should at least be aware that it is always an option. ■



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