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8 Proven Steps to Double Your Referrals

By Stephen Fairley

For many law firms, referrals are the gold standard when it comes to obtaining new clients. However, too many firms rely on random referrals, which is just what the term implies … referrals that may or may not come. A strong referral base is only built over a period of time, and is based on cultivating long-term, meaningful relationships with reliable sources. Most referral sources will only send you referrals if they know you send referrals back to them.

Here are five fundamental keys to increasing referrals.

1. Do not try to be a generalist. The fastest way to lose referrals from other professionals is by practicing several different kinds of law. In fact, every practice area you add over your primary one will cost you many, many referrals over time. For example, if most of your practice is transactional business law, and occasionally you take on a litigation matter for an existing client, but you introduce yourself at networking events and on your website as someone who does business transactional and commercial litigation, every litigation attorney will now see you as a competitor, not a potential referral source.

2. Actively build relationships with at least five to 10 new referral sources each year. I know, it's easier said than done, but the best way to have your practice "crash and burn" is to totally rely on a handful of referral sources. As the saying goes, "it's not a matter of if, but when" one or more of your referral sources will dry up. Make it your goal to meet and develop at least one new referral source per month, then cultivate that relationship by staying connected every month. Remember, referrals are a numbers game. Not every referral source will be in a position to send you a referral every month, so if you are relying on three to five people to send you the bulk of your business, you can rest assured that you will have some really slow months. The most vibrant practices, have a constant influx of new referral sources on a regular basis.

3. Keep in touch on a consistent basis, at least five to 10 times per year. This can be a combination of a "reconnecting" email, commenting on their LinkedIn or Facebook post, sending out a monthly newsletter, making a phone call, going to lunch, sending small thank you gifts, and visits to their office twice per year. If you want to build a thriving network of attorney referral sources, you must be prepared to go out of your way to generate referrals for them as well.

Developing a relationship is a two-way process. It can't just be you asking your legal peers for referrals when you see them. It requires regular contact, and you showing as much concern for their business, as you are asking them to show for yours.

4. Send a thank you card or gift for every single referral they make. I recently sent a referral to a new Google pay-per-click company I just met here in the Valley. Within a week I had received a thank you note and a box of brownies… and so did my assistant. It was a very nice touch, and made a big impression on me. Since then I've sent them three more referrals. Say 'thank you' every single time, regardless of whether you land the client or not.

5. Do not just rely on other attorneys for referrals. Many of the best referral sources can be outside of the legal industry. For example, if you are a divorce attorney, develop relationships with psychologists and marriage and family counselors. If you are a criminal defense attorney, connect with substance abuse therapists. If you are a real estate attorney, seek to build relationships with commercial real estate brokers. If you are a business attorney, attend networking events filled with CPAs. If you are an estate planning attorney, reach out to financial advisers and planners. Be willing to look outside of your existing network to other non-legal professionals.

Here is the eight-step referral system I have taught thousands of attorneys:

1. Identify your best possible referral sources. These will be other attorneys (not competitors) and non-legal professionals, with a similar clientele to yours. I've mentioned several examples above. Remember, choose those with a growing business (not at the end of their career, winding things down), maintain close connections with their clients, do excellent work, and maintain a great reputation (both online and offline). Also, it's important to work with those you feel comfortable with, and who describe their best clients in similar terms as you.

2. Create a database of 100-200 professionals in your local area. This should include every person who has ever referred someone to you, as well as your identified best possible referral sources. Some good resources include LinkedIn, Superpages.com, Avvo.com and your local or state trade associations.

3. Create a "letter of introduction" template. Here's an example:

Dear noncompeting attorney with a tax practice,
My name is __________of the law firm _____________ in (city, state). I'm writing to see if you would be interested in getting together to learn about each other's services and respective target markets. It is my hope, that such a meeting can lead to the creation of a referral relationship that would benefit both of our firms.
We have been in business since ______, and we focus our practice on (your area of practice). Many of our clients ask us for referrals to trusted and experienced tax attorneys who can help them protect the wealth they're creating through their real estate holdings. For our part, we are

constantly looking to expand our network of professional advisers in the local area, from whom we can identify potential referrals for our clients.
For more information about our firm, we invite you to visit our website at: ________________
In the next week, our office will call to see if you are interested in meeting. I look forward to exchanging ideas with you.
Sincerely,

4. Have your assistant mail out 10-20 letters per week on your letterhead. Do not send a bunch of letters at once – pace yourself. Many attorneys ask if it has to be a mailed letter. No, it does not, but in many cases you will get a better response. Most professionals will open a letter from an attorney. There is an over-reliance of email, and fewer people are sending mail these days so it stands out. Email can get lost. You may also want to try sending an "In mail" using LinkedIn, if you are a proficient user of LinkedIn.

5. For each letter you send out, plan on having your assistant make three to four follow-up calls. The purpose of this call is two-fold: to confirm their interest in getting together, and to set a time. This is not direct solicitation or a sales pitch – it is simply a follow-up call to see if they are interested. Call them once per week, for three to four weeks before giving up.

Prepare a simple phone script for your assistant and make sure he or she has answers to simple questions about your law firm: How long have you been in practice/ business? Who is your ideal client? Where are you located? What's your primary practice area? What's your website URL? How did you find my name/contact information?

Be sure your assistant asks a few questions of your potential referral source: Who is your ideal client? What kind of client do you enjoy working with the most? Do you currently have a ________ attorney you refer cases/clients to? Are you open to discussing developing a referral relationship with a law firm like ours if there's a good connection? Do you seek to make referrals to other non-competing professionals? How many clients do you serve in a typical year? Where is your office located?

If they are not interested, tell them, "No problem. I'm sorry to have bothered you. We will immediately remove you from our list of referral sources."

Here's the truth … the vast majority will welcome your call! We have made thousands of follow-up calls for our clients, and scheduled hundreds of face-to-face meetings, and only a handful have said 'No.' Remember, this is not a sales pitch; it's just lunch!

Another option is to set up a brief meeting at first, just to see if there's a good connection. Offer to meet them at their office for 30 minutes (lower risk and very convenient for them, plus you get to see their office and meet their team). The first meeting or two, needs to be face-to-face, in order to establish rapport and build the relationship.

It might take your assistant several calls just to get through. Don't get discouraged! Remember, they are very busy professionals just like you.

6. The goal is to set three to six face-to-face meetings per month. At the face-to-face meeting you want to spend 80 percent of the time getting to know them and their practice, to determine if it's a good fit.

Ask lots of questions: How did you first get started in **_____**? What do you like best and least about your work? What's the biggest challenge you are facing? How do you find most of your clients? What does your typical client look like?

And the most important referral question of all: How would I know if someone would be a great referral for you?

7. Invite them to a second meeting if the first meeting goes well. If your initial meeting goes well, immediately invite them to a second one, where you can go into more detail about your practice area and how the two of you could start cross-referring business.

Remember, you cannot promise them referrals, you cannot guarantee referrals, nor can you pay them a referral fee (unless they are an attorney and you meet your state's guidelines)! However, the vast majority don't want a referral fee, nor will their professional code of ethics doesn't allow one. They want a referral in return.

8. Follow up! When it comes to getting more referrals from other professionals, the fortune is in the follow up! Here are some tips:

- Send an email immediately after you meet with them. Send it the same day when possible.
- Send a handwritten thank you card or form letter about 2-3 days after your initial meeting.
- After your meeting put a "to do" or task item in your Outlook for approximately 6-8 weeks after your initial meeting.
- Set up "lunch and learns" where several professionals informally get together over lunch to exchange leads, discuss business, and encourage each other.
- Make your next meeting more about the relationship than business. Meet at the golf course, over drinks or a casual place.
- Send them a copy of your published articles.
- Create and send out a separate, monthly newsletter just for referral sources.
- Use social media to stay connected – invite them to connect to you on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, etc.

I have taught this easy step-by-step system to thousands of attorneys, who have used this exact process to quickly build networks of 50-60 new referral sources in 90 days.

Imagine what would happen to your law practice, if you could have 10, 20, 30, or more new referral sources every single year, consistently sending you new clients. It can happen, by creating a referral system that delivers real – not random – results.

Two-time international bestselling author, Stephen Fairley is CEO of The Rainmaker Institute LLC, the nation's largest law firm marketing company specializing in marketing and lead conversion for small to medium law firms. Over 18,000 attorneys nationwide have benefited from learning and implementing the proven Rainmaker Marketing System. Over the last 16 years, he has become a nationally recognized legal marketing expert and been named, America's Top Marketing Coach. He has spoken numerous times for over 35 of the nation's largest state and local bar associations and has a large virtual footprint with his highly successful Rainmaker legal marketing blog and has over 200,000 followers on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. For more information, please visit www.TheRainmaker-Institute.com or call (888) 588-5891.