

Building a practice and Building a profile

By Emily Morrow



NO DOUBT YOU KNOW WHAT it means to build a legal practice. Do you have as clear an idea of what it means to build a “profile”?

Consider the following. Peter, a barrister, specialises in certain types of litigation. He is bright, capable, hard-working and has practised for 15 years. Early on, Peter identified his speciality areas and articulated those for himself and others. He did high quality work and, in a quiet but consistent way, made sure the word got out.

He wrote articles, sought out opportunities to speak at conferences, met with prospective clients and referrers etc. Being now known throughout New Zealand for his excellent work, he is always on the “short list” for his areas of expertise. Peter has a national profile. Even when the market for legal services is “slow”, Peter always gets more than his fair share of the work.

Mary is a solicitor who, like Peter, is bright, capable and hard-working. Mary specialises in particular types of corporate law and also has been in practice for 15 years. Although she thinks about how to differentiate her practice from those of other lawyers, she does not focus on the issue.

Although Mary consistently does a good job for her clients, she does relatively little to publicise what she does and how she does it. When I asked Mary how she built her practice, she said: “I do great work, rely on word-of-mouth and get one client at a time”. Mary is known within her community and has a steady flow of work. Mary has a good practice.

What's the difference?

I would say Peter has built a profile and Mary has built a practice.

What is the difference? Which of the two do you aspire to build? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

A good definition of the word “profile” is “a degree or level of public exposure”.

To build a profile, one needs to do so in a concerted, focused and comprehensive way. It’s helpful to have a non-negotiable intention to create a certain level of public exposure, which intention informs everything one does.

Typically, a profile develops as the result of many small, consistent actions taken over the course of an extended time period. It’s like watching a spider build a resilient web, one small strand at a time. You have to be committed to it over the long haul.

In building a practice, the focus tends to be on discrete actions designed to attract one or more clients. It often is a more ad hoc, opportunistic process. The conceptual framework is the intention to build a practice, one client at a time. It tends to be less driven by a clearly articulated vision that informs the process. One needs to work hard at it, but it may lack some of the intensity, cohesion and focus needed to build a high visibility profile.

One certainly can build a practice without wanting (or intending) to build a profile. Building a profile is not “better” than building a practice, but frequently it is different in terms of the process and outcome. If your intention is to create a high visibility, premier practice, then you may want to focus on building a profile.

Articulating your brand

Successfully building your legal profile begins with differentiating what you do and how you do it from other lawyers.

As a trusts and estates lawyer I articulated my “brand” (defined as a “particular kind or type of something”) of estate planning as follows: “Top quality, tailored legal service woven together with familial, financial and other non-legal considerations to create a tapestry that will withstand the test of time”. This “brand” permeated everything I did, including conversations, public speaking, writing articles, etc. It was short, compelling, unique and memorable.

The words “weave”, “tapestry” and “test of time” were what people remembered. They incorporated a visual image and an idea.

It worked well and I built both a practice and a profile.

As a consultant, I encourage clients to think about the brand for their practice. What metaphor will uniquely and compellingly describe their work and themselves? How can they articulate this crisply and memorably? How will people respond? How can they get the message out so it has greatest impact?

Getting the word out

Assuming you articulate your legal brand and the profile you want to build, you will need to work consistently to accomplish this.

Although there are many ways to build profile, I remain convinced that the best way to do so is through relationship building. High quality relationships are the essential “stickiness” that will make you memorable in a good way.

Because all you have to sell as a lawyer is your time, that commodity will be very precious when invested in building a professional profile.

Consequently, I think of “primary” and “secondary” building blocks in the creation of a high visibility, well respected profile.

Primary building blocks

The primary building blocks are those things you can do which will form the basis for the relationships with your “target audience”. Your target audience includes both your existing and prospective clients, your professional colleagues (both within and outside of your firm) and existing and prospective referral sources. The primary building blocks are:

- high quality face-to-face interactions, one-on-one or in groups;
- public speaking tailored to your target audience(s);
- written work that will be read by and of interest to your target audience(s); and
- involvement in your community in constructive ways that will reflect well on your practice and you.

If you consistently combine great legal work with these primary building blocks, you will build a profile over time. Yes, you will need to leave the comfort of your office to do so,

but no, it won't be as unpleasant or difficult as you might think.

Secondary building blocks

The secondary building blocks consist of those things which will not alone build a profile, but will reinforce the relationship building process. These include:

- having a website and/or blog that are distinctive and accurately portray what is unique about your work and you;
- utilising social media judiciously;
- email communications, either to groups or individuals; and
- similar "lower touch" interactions with your target audience(s).

Lawyers rarely get new clients by having a fabulous website. However, having a strong website can be the final link in the chain that converts a prospect into a client or a referral source into a piece of work. This is true of the secondary building blocks.

How will you know when you have successfully built a professional profile?

It reminds me of the moment when you know you have adequately researched a challenging legal issue. It occurs when everything points in that direction.

If you hear anecdotally that your articles are referenced by others, that you are on all the "short lists" and that your name always comes up when your areas of expertise are discussed, then you are well on your way.

Believe me, you will know it when it happens, just like when you know you have sufficiently researched a tough legal issue. Everywhere you look, the indicators will be consistent.

Maintaining your profile

Two concepts come to mind in terms of maintaining a professional profile.

The first is "one cannot ever afford to rest on one's laurels", and the other is "nevertheless, find an angle of repose".

Don't take anything for granted, but do find a sustainable homeostasis. Predictably, at some point your efforts will noticeably shift from building your profile and obtaining work

to doing that work. However, even when the work pipeline is flowing prolifically, never stop priming the pump.

Continue to appreciate people who send you work, accept interesting speaking engagements, write articles, update your website, and, most importantly, if you have a team, train your team members in the skills of profile building.

Ultimately, your energy and enthusiasm will wane. At that point, you will reap what you have sown with your team members.

In my practice, I was extremely fortunate to work with and be able to cultivate younger lawyers and legal executives. When I left the practice, they took it over and have subsequently grown the profile and the client base. I am extraordinarily proud of them!

Keep fine tuning the message

What initially enabled you to build your profile might not later get you where you want to be in terms of that profile.

For example, initially in my practice my target audience consisted of almost anyone who needed estate planning. Later, as my profile became more established, my focus shifted to working on large, complex, multi-generational estate plans for successful family business owners. Because my overall profile in the market was well established, it was relatively easy to fine tune the message.

Similarly, in your practice, I imagine the type of work and clients you want will evolve over time. Consider carefully how you describe your practice to existing/prospective clients, colleagues and referrers as your objectives evolve. Generally, I find people can be quite receptive to carefully crafted, thoughtful evolving messages.

Passing along the baton

Assuming you have successfully built and maintained your profile, likely you will consistently have more than your fair share of work with high quality clients.

You may have a firm of your own, a team or practice group, or perhaps you will have developed less formal working relationships

with colleagues in other practices. Presumably, you will have invested considerable time and energy in either training those team members or supporting the success of your colleagues.

At some point, you may decide you have had enough of the practice of law and want to move into the next phase of your life. My philosophy is "retire early and often", although I realise that approach is not for everyone. Some of my former partners either have (or aspire to) "dying with their boots on and their feet on their desk", whereas others have moved on at various ages.

My unqualified advice to you is this: Do not have any anxiety about leaving the practice of law and wholeheartedly embrace the next phase of your life.

I realise it can be hard to leave the life work into which you have put so much effort. However, there **is** life after the practice of law and, in my experience, it is rich and rewarding. There are many ways to define yourself and you may find those to be more meaningful and enduring than your identity as a lawyer. In fact, you may find yourself going on to build an entirely different profile for yourself in a post-lawyer persona. Stranger things have happened.

So, envision the professional profile and practice you wish to build, set about building it, savour your success and that of others with whom you work, and then exit gracefully when the time comes. If you can do that, you will truly have been successful!

Emily Morrow was a lawyer and senior partner with a large firm in Vermont, where she built a trusts, estates and tax practice. Having lived and worked in Sydney and Vermont, Emily now resides in Auckland and provides tailored consulting services for lawyers, barristers, in-house counsel, law firms and barristers' chambers focusing on non-technical skills that correlate with professional success; business development, communication, delegation, self-presentation, leadership, team building/management and the like. Emily can be reached at www.emilymorrow.com.

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