



Business Growth Options in a Small Legal Practice

What You Can Do, Channels that You Can Utilise
and Guide for Creating a Plan



1. INTRODUCTION

This leaflet was published by Support Services at Law Society of Ireland to provide proprietors of small legal practices with information about business growth options that are relevant to their business. It does not deal authoritatively with legal and regulatory matters and it should not be relied upon in this regard.

For authoritative guidance, please consult with Law Society of Ireland Committee and Regulation Department publications, along with the book '*A Guide to Good Professional Conduct for Solicitors*'.

Increasingly, owners of legal practices, including small practices, need to engage in business development activities. This work is best guided by a business growth strategy that, at the very least, identifies desired clients and preferred work and plots out how the practice will go about prospecting and attract in new business.

1.1 Pivotal Matters to Business Growth Strategy

'Lead generation' is the process through which you source potential clients. In order to have a predictable and scalable business model, a practice should have a consistent and measurable lead generation system. A lead is any person that shows some potential for becoming a client.

A practice should know how many leads they are generating, how those leads are generated, and what happens to all of those potential clients. Knowing how many leads a practice produces, how many of those leads convert into potential clients, and how much it costs to produce a lead is critical.

Branding is another important matter. Prospective clients buy on the basis of branding. Your practice's image matters because as far as the client knows, your image is effectively who your practice is. Creating, maintaining, and adjusting your image is how you gain and retain the clients you want to work with.

If your image is inconsistent across platforms or doesn't closely align with what your practice truly is, then there will be negative consequences.

2. BUSINESS GROWTH CHANNELS

Business growth channels are the pathways through which you distribute your practice's messaging. Whether those channels are social media networks, ads, a website, or just a conversation among colleagues, your business growth channels will control your practice's exposure and lead flow.

Every law practice needs a good mix of channels, but that "mix" will vary based on your practice's goals, your competitive environment, and most importantly where your clients are looking. Here is a sample of law practice business growth channels, as well as how they are used:

2.1 Referrals

Whether they come from clients or through recommendations from other practices, referrals are the lifeblood of most legal firms. Simple repeat business is increasingly viewed as unpredictable and difficult to scale into a larger or more lucrative business. Because of this trend, more and more practices are chasing referrals.

So, referrals are playing an increasingly important part in the business of acquiring new clients. This trend is also expected to develop further because - thanks to advances in social media, data analytics, and years of engaging law practices - there are proven ways to maintain and optimise how you do at attracting referrals.

2.2 Information Provision

Legal content business growth serves three purposes: it builds a relationship with potential clients before you even meet them, it demonstrates your expertise and it provides a robust information platform to assist search engine optimisation (SEO).

You have to attend to publishing content and disseminating it. Both actions are necessary. If you're just producing content, your practice must be promoting that content so it is actually being read regularly by potential clients.

2.3 Social Media

Practices often neglect their social media accounts, if they have any accounts at all. While at times social media can seem “gimmicky”, “temporary”, or even a “general waste of time”, the truth is that everyone’s clients use social media. The difficult part is finding which platforms your clients use, and how they use them.

Social media gives a living pulse to a practice’s otherwise stagnant online presence and is the equivalent to virtually shaking hands with your followers just to show them you’re still around. Social media can also be used to demonstrate expertise, promote content, engage in the community, and communicate with prospective clients.

2.4 Advertising and Sponsorship

Advertising and sponsorship should feature in every practice development strategy. However, the effect produced is almost always a long term one, built on over time. Don’t expect an immediate return on money spent on advertising and sponsorship.

2.5 Paid Digital Business Growth

Practices that are hungry for new clients are susceptible to throwing cash at the problem. Like a poorly vetted new hire, these quick-fix campaigns are often expensive and disappointing. They tend to create more headaches than they’re worth.

Paid advertising on Google can be tempting. It’s flashy, looks promising, and the results are as immediate as the cash flowing out of the practice’s account. But without daily monitoring, you can quickly be disappointed.

Lead generation through advertising or direct business growth is the fastest path to clients and revenue BUT it comes with a price tag. This type of business growth also only works for certain kinds of clients. Clients need to be able to make autonomous decisions and should have an acute need. In response, you have to get to the heart of their problem.

3. HOW TO CREATE A BUSINESS GROWTH PLAN

Step 1: Identify What Differentiates Your Practice

- What legal services do you provide?
- What skills or experience are you known for or do you want to be known for?
- Describe your practice in one or two sentences.
- See additional practice guidance on practice niches.

Step 2: Identify Your Target Market

- Who do you want to reach? Who needs your services? What kinds of people or situations do you like to serve? Who do you want calling you?
- If individuals will be your target clients, what age range, what occupation, income range, family type, etc., would you expect in your clients? If businesses will be your target clients, what industries, how large, average revenues, type of ownership, etc. would you expect?
- Where do you already have opportunities, connections, a knowledge base, a reputation?
- Look at the needs of your geographic region, including the size of your legal market, any trends, or limitations.
- Identify the following: ideal clients by name or type; ideal clients by name or position; ideal referral sources by name, position, or service.

Step 3: Review Your Competition

- Your market analysis should include an identification of the competition, as well as why your service will be better than or different from the competition.

- Who are your competitors? How strong are they? Are your target clients already using your competitors? Are your competitors strong enough financially to force you out?

Step 4: Identify Your Current Business Development Stage

- What stage are you in regarding business development? A new practice without any clients or contacts? Or an experienced solicitor with no or few clients but with lots of contacts?
- Where do you need to focus your business development efforts?
 - Building your knowledge of and reputation for your niche services?
 - Establishing contacts in and referral sources to your target market?
 - Deepening relationships with your connections with your target market?

Step 5: Identify Your Business Development Goals

- To be effective, your goals should be SMART—Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time-driven.
- Set your goals for the next three, six, and twelve months based on your answers in the preceding steps.
- What do you want to accomplish by the end of twelve months? Think in terms of revenue, number of new clients, referral sources, contacts in your niche market, knowledge in your practice area, etc.
- What do you need to accomplish in the next six months to meet your twelve-month goals?

Step 6: Select Business Growth Tactics

- Choose a few simple, repeatable business growth tactics that fit you, and use them consistently to reach your target market. These are your keys to success. Common tactics to select from include: one-on-one networking and relationship building; traditional memberships in groups related to your target market; referral sources; online networking; writing and/or public speaking; advertising and sponsorships

- Be Strategic. Because it generally takes between six and seven contacts before a prospect takes action—and you probably have limits on resources such as time, money, and energy.

Step 7: Prepare Your Business Growth Tools.

- Business cards. They should be professional and on high-quality paper. Include a brief description of what you do and for whom.
- Advertisements. Consider whether advertisements are the best way to reach your target market. Be warned: advertising can come with a hefty price tag. If you decide on advertising, identify the best publications to reach your target market.
- Website. Be strategic about creating your website. Identify the purpose you want it to serve for your practice and create it according to your needs and your budget. Your website should be branded to match your business cards.
- Facebook. Consider creating a professional profile. At a minimum, include a description of your practice in the 'About' section of your Facebook page.
- LinkedIn profile. Create or expand your profile. Search engine optimise your profile, headline, and title with keywords about your services and niche target market. Put your website address on your profile.
- Elevator speech. You should have a 10 to 20 second elevator speech or self-introduction that incorporates energy around the benefits of what you do. Electronic announcements. Weigh the cost of printing and mailing announcements versus electronic announcements via e-mail.

Step 8: Make a List of Your Market Contacts.

- Look at all of your existing contacts and identify by name which ones are in your target market or are potential referral sources for work in your target market.
 - clients and former clients
 - friends and relatives
 - neighbours
 - business associates
 - former colleagues
 - trade associations and industry groups
 - non-competing solicitors

- other service providers to the same market
- non-profit organizations and boards

Step 9: Make a List of Possible Contacts in Target Market

- Do research to learn more about this market and identify:
 - Ideal clients by name or type
 - Ideal client contacts by name or position
 - Ideal referral sources by name, position, or service

Step 10: Plan to Reach Out to Identified Contacts

- Use the two or three business growth tactics you chose above to start getting in front of and meeting potential contacts in your target market. Volunteer and become a frequent speaker or writer for your potential market. Commit to daily or weekly business development activities.
- When establishing and maintaining business relationships, use your best relationship skills - the skills you use in personal relationships such as: listening, asking, observing and caring.

Step 11: Decide On Your Business Growth Budget

- Be realistic about what you can spend on business growth. Be smart about focusing your budget on effective techniques to accomplish action plans using your chosen business growth strategies and tactics.

Step 12: Compile your business growth plan.

- Your completed plan should include:
 - Services to be offered, differentiation sought and market to be targeted
 - Three, six, and twelve month business development goals
 - Chosen business growth tactics

- Weekly business development activities
- Business growth budget