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SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN ■ TIPS & TACTICS FOR NEW LAWYERS

Build a Niche Expertise

Both inside their firms and as they venture out, associates must begin to set themselves apart from the other fine lawyers in the marketplace. Discerning clients look for lawyers who are specialized and understand the client's particular industry or legal needs. While you should focus first on becoming a proficient, well-rounded legal counselor, you also need to develop a distinct area of expertise to become more valuable to your firm and advance your career.

Identify a niche. Begin to identify potential areas in which you could become an expert in your firm. Select an area that interests you, in which the firm has limited expertise, that is in demand by clients, and that is new or emerging and therefore on an upward growth trend. Find a void and fill it.

Confer with mentors. Identify key business developers in your firm who have a strong reputation in a niche. Learn how they promote their expertise. Talk to your mentor or a partner with management responsibility about your interest in developing expertise in the niche. Get confirmation that it would be useful for your career development and for the firm strategically.

Learn everything you can. Become an expert in your chosen niche by tracking recent cases and trends, reading industry or legal publications, taking CLE courses and attending professional and trade association events rele-

vant to your niche. Network with others who have expertise in this area or who have a need you seek to satisfy.

Position your expertise. If you've done your homework well, you can define your special knowledge in terms of the value it brings to clients. Identify the issues and opportunities you are addressing, and match those to the specific services and benefits you offer in this area. Be prepared with an "elevator speech," a one-sentence description that explains, in layperson's terms, what you do and the benefits you provide.

Promote yourself. Find out which clients and lawyers in your firm could benefit from your special knowledge. Circulate internal memos, advisories or articles that will keep your colleagues and their clients informed. Publish articles and give presentations on your area of expertise.

Some of the most successful lawyers have built their reputations on single issues or markets. The important thing is to continuously assess the needs of your marketplace. Get input from those who understand the specific needs, then develop a practice profile that articulates those needs and the services you offer that provide real solutions. ■



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Checklist

How to Find the Right Niche

- Look at your firm's areas of growth and research the market trends. Will this particular area continue to grow? How many clients and prospects need this type of legal help?
- Find out what types of legal work your firm is referring to other law firms. What types of work being referred out would your firm rather keep?
- Track new legislation and regulations to find areas where the general or business public will need to be informed about opportunities or threats.
- Read legal publications to assess trends in the profession and to identify hot new practice areas.
- Scan business and daily news publications with an entrepreneurial eye to identify industries or issues that are growing.
- Look through clients' eyes to define your expertise according to their needs: by issue, location, industry or some other common factor that categories of clients will perceive as of value.