



LESSONS LEARNED— SURVIVING AND THRIVING AS A SOLO AND SMALL FIRM ATTORNEY

**Valeria Kumin
with Matt Kumin**

Having experienced the toll that solo life had taken on Matt and our family during his ten years of learning, surviving, and struggling as a legal professional, we decided that the definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over again expecting things to change—was correct. And we wanted to do something about it. Once we made that decision, our lives changed positively forever. Now, five years later, we have developed a passion for sharing the lessons we learned. We did that at two workshops held at BASF, one session titled “Hanging Out Your Shingle” and the second titled “Ramping Up Your Law Practice: Strategies for Success.”

Solo practitioners deserve a good life, filled with a sense that they enjoy what they do (at least most of the time), happiness, a sense of accomplishment, and financial success. Matt and I have committed ourselves to helping them (and in my case, to helping other professionals as well) get that life. We want to see lawyers start and grow their practices using their innate wisdom, aided by the experiences of two seasoned hands.

There are several components to a successful career and a happy life, but you wouldn't know it from what law school teaches you. The truth is that the law school really only teaches you law. (That's component number 1.) Sure, you got the knowledge and skills, but we know that's not enough.

Clearly, there are more components, like logistics and administration. This includes setting up the systems and procedures that ensure the smooth operation of the practice. (We heard some of you guffaw!) That's the second piece.

And, there is a key third element: marketing—which includes public relations and client management—essentially everything to do with bringing the clients into the business and keeping them.

Let's dwell on that one for a minute.

You can be the most talented and brilliant lawyer, but if you don't have clients and no one knows about you,



Matt and Valeria Kumin

you will remain unknown and broke—though of course, still talented. Sadly enough, a lot of lawyers overlook the importance of marketing themselves, and they lack the very learnable skills of effective networking and effective relationship building. One of the things that helped Matt to grow his practice was his desire to build relationships with other lawyers including with opposing counsel, not only in his main practices areas but in complementary ones as well. This worked out well, especially when he was beginning his practice and needed to supplement his practice with contract work. He was on the phone every day looking for overflow work. (Recently, he began coventuring with a former opposing counsel. They had litigated a case ten years ago.)

Another important factor in Matt's success as a solo practitioner was finding and building a great relationship with a hugely dedicated and effective civil rights lawyer who became a mentor and a friend for life. That relationship—with a true mentor—created a critical foundation for the rest of his career.

So, here is an exercise that we encourage and that we used at the workshops. It's called asking yourself a question and answering it honestly. This next part is interactive, so stop for a minute and answer these questions: What have I done this week to promote and grow my practice? Have I looked for a mentor? Have I met attorneys who could refer business to me? What else can I do next week? In slow times, have I taken advantage of the time to write articles for publication in legal journals or to speak at a workshop or local social club? Matt says that he builds marketing into his practice every day and believes that has helped him develop the skill (and fun) in an area that he once truly hated and resented and judged with descriptions like "shallow," "unprofessional," and even "unnecessary." Naturally, given that attitude, he was also not that good at it.

The fourth essential part of a successful law practice is everything to do with the person himself or herself. This is about what we bring to the table—our personality, our fears, our level of discipline, and our communication skills. Also critical to assess is relationship-building skills

and public presentation skills. The point isn't to look at all this and immediately give up (we can hear some of you beating yourself up just reading this list) but instead to look at what area you can develop. By the way, this only works if you believe that you can get better at something. If not, stop reading this article now!

All four areas are extremely important—without the professional skills you can't serve a client. Without good internal systems the business can't be efficient and profitable. Without bringing in and maintaining clients there is no money coming in. We've seen good lawyers sitting at their offices expecting clients to come in and trying to make ends meet without a steady flow of work. In contrast is Matt's law partner Steven Sommers, who went

When teaching and mentoring lawyers we combine the business side of law with the science and psychology of success. What does that mean?

In the recent workshops that we conducted we addressed a crucial element that holds back a lot of lawyers: the lack of vision for their law practice. The reality is that without identifying and creating a compelling and clear vision of what kind of law practice you are building you can spend years working very hard but ultimately being unhappy with the results you produce. As I tell workshop participants, you first need to identify the destination, the outcome, or the vision for your business. Once you have that, a good business coach can help you to design a specific plan how to get there.

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through strong growth periods as he powered himself to success—he was named the San Francisco AIDS Legal Referral Panel's Attorney of the Year in 2008 for his pro bono work. He took on something like forty-two pro bono cases over the course of eighteen months.

There are ways to develop these skills, and yet some of you reading this are saying, rationally, "I know they're right, but I can't motivate myself to move to a better place." And motivation is key. Since Matt and I decided to help lawyers together, we've met and mentored quite a few. Many are ready and willing to work, because they are tired of their lack of financial success or, even if they are doing well financially, are burned out and unhappy—in some cases, with families falling apart. But some don't have a vision and can't motivate themselves to get started without help from an outside source.

Getting motivated is critical, and that involves some honest self-assessment. Ask yourself: Have I made limiting decisions about my life? Do I hear and allow other people (historically or now) to tell me what I can't accomplish? Do I get stuck in everyday activities without looking at the bigger picture of my law practice?

Ultimately, it's your own life. Take charge of it!

Valeria Kumin is a business and life coach. Matt Kumin, who contributed to this article, is a partner at Kumin Sommers LLP, focusing on civil rights and employment law. Both coach and mentor attorneys. For more information, contact Valeria Kumin at valeria@gateway2growth.com.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- Create a concrete image of where you want your law practice to be in three years.
- Develop a unique brand for yourself.
- Market, market, market.
- Create support systems including mentors, coaches, and other attorneys.