



4 Secrets For Creating A Profitable Immigration Practice

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Law360, New York (May 27, 2016, 7:52 PM ET) -- In a crowded field like immigration law, it can sometimes be difficult to ensure that your firm stays profitable, especially when it comes to attracting and keeping important clients.

From carving out a niche to harnessing the power of social media, there's a slew of things immigration attorneys can do to boost their firms' profits, whether they're just starting out in immigration law or firmly established in the field. These four tips will help lawyers keep their immigration practice profitable.

Create a Niche for Yourself

Immigration is a huge field, from deportation defense to more corporate issues, such as moving executives to different offices around the world. Faced with such a wide variety of immigration topics, attorneys can be successful by focusing on a specific area, according to Robert Whitehill, a partner with Fox Rothschild LLP.

"The field is broad. And there are narrow specialists within the field who do pretty darn well by focusing on a narrow area, within a narrow area," Whitehill said, offering an example of a successful immigration lawyer who

used to be a track star and now represents athletes.

Being very familiar with a specific country and fluent in its language can also be a major asset, according to Glenn Cooper, a shareholder with GrayRobinson PA.

“We have a lot of Brazilian immigration coming to Florida, and so fluency in Portuguese — and knowledge of the Brazilian market — can be very helpful in developing that area,” Cooper said.

Of course, there are some areas of immigration law that are known for being especially lucrative such as the EB-5 visa program, which gives green cards to immigrants who invest \$500,000 and create new jobs in the United States. But lawyers cautioned attorneys who don’t have experience with EB-5 from simply jumping into that arena, which is notoriously complex and nuanced, as they could quickly stumble into trouble.

“My recommendation is if you don’t do that area, like if you don’t do EB-5, don't do an EB-5 case,” said Mark Ivener of Ivener & Fullmer LLP. “Because you’re looking at a malpractice suit.”

Still, attorneys may want to educate themselves on some of the more lucrative areas of immigration law. Permanent residency cases, difficult deportation cases, immigration litigation and L-1 visas for intracompany transfers can all be quite expensive, according to Whitehill.

Network and Cultivate Referral Relationships

Networking can be helpful in basically any career, but in the unpredictable world of immigration, building a network of attorneys can be crucial, according to Angelo Paparelli, a partner with Seyfarth Shaw LLP.

“You want to get intelligence on the ground as to what's happening in particular consulate posts. What's happening in particular offices of USCIS? Or particular courts in the federal system?” Paparelli said. “And that simply can't be obtained without developing a network.”

Connecting with professionals from outside the immigration arena can also be beneficial, according to Gina Polo, a partner at Weiss Alden & Polo PA who discovered that accountants, bankers and corporate attorneys are good sources of the business for her. For instance, if a banker has a client with an immigration issue, they can refer the client to Polo.

And if someone sends you business, you need to put the work into sustaining that relationship, according to Polo, who said she has a system for touching base with people, whether it's going to lunch or having coffee, and talking to them about their practice.

"One of the things that I hear a lot from from [certified public accountants] and other people that refer us business is: 'I used to know an immigration attorney ... but I haven't talked to her in years,'" Polo said. "And I think that that's a big mistake. ... When somebody refers you business, and you develop that relationship, you need to maintain it."

Boost Your Digital Footprint

In this highly digital age, attorneys shouldn't underestimate the power of blogging or social media to bring clients or opportunities. For instance, Paparelli said he knows many lawyers who have special purpose blogs, which might only focus on one specific visa category.

"[The] client goes there, and they find out — or they form the impression — that this lawyer or this law firm must know everything about the subject," Paparelli said.

Attorneys could also form an entire website, separate from their main law firm site, that deals with a particular aspect of immigration. Ivener, for example, created a separate EB-5 website, allowing him to showcase that specialty. And don't forget about social media, which can also lead to opportunities.

"I've gotten engagements from social media, where it was 100 percent solely

based on social media activity, and [became] a go-to person for information,” said Ian Macdonald, a shareholder with Greenberg Traurig LLP.

Maintaining contact with a client through emails or monthly newsletters can also drum up business, according to Cooper, although he warned that sending them too many messages may result in requests to be removed from the email list.

“But if you can do it from time to time, with valuable information, it tends to oftentimes prompt a phone call saying, ‘Oh I saw your email, and it reminded me to call you about a new matter we had,’” he said.

Invest in a Client

Taking the time to really invest in a client is also key, experts say. By providing progress reports and other benefits, attorneys should build trust with a client and keep them coming back, according to Elizabeth Espin Stern of Mayer Brown LLP.

“If all you do is tell them every time you win a visa, well, the only thing that's going to be memorable is the one you don't win, right?” she asked, adding that attorneys should “take advantage of the opportunity to say to the client, ... ‘You're using me — let me show you what my practice is doing for you.’”

And don't underestimate how long it may take to win a client's business. Instead, attorneys may want to take the long-game approach when it comes to wooing clients, according to Macdonald.

“I always tell my people don't give up ... continue in the relationship,” he said. “You may not get an immediate response. Indeed, you should look at client opportunities as a three- to five-year plan, rather than an immediate opportunity for closing.”

--Editing by Christine Chun and Kelly Duncan.