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Four Rules for Building Relationships and Referrals

By Douglas Brown

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He is an attorney, business executive, and entrepreneurial educator with over 20 years of experience helping people and organizations reach their potential. As managing partner with Pelorus Advisors in Hartford (www.pelorusadvisors.com), Doug coaches organizations on strategy, revenue enhancement, expense control, and organizational development.

He has served the CBA in a variety of capacities over the years, including as chair of the Young Lawyer's Section and now as vice chair of the Small Firm Practice Management Section. In 2002 the Connecticut Law Tribune recognized Attorney Brown as its first New Leader of the Law for Overall Accomplishment in New Haven County based on his first 10 years as an attorney. He is an active member and speaker in the Waterbury business community.

Referrals are one of the most critical elements to building your law practice.

Now that we have a firm grasp of the obvious, let's talk about the more important ideas. Just **how** do you actually make referrals happen? Why does it come so easily to some and not

at all to others? And **why** don't they teach this in law school?

This is just the first of many questions I will be addressing in this new column: Building Your Practice: Practical Tips for Success. My name is Doug Brown and I'm thrilled to have this opportunity to join the *Connecticut Lawyer* family. My goal is simple: To provide practical advice and perspectives from the business community to help you build your law business.

In this inaugural column we'll talk about a question I hear all the time and something on the Top 10 List of things CBA members asked about in a recent survey: How do I get more referrals?

Networking for Referrals

Networking doesn't get you referrals. It's as simple as that. It might get you an introduction—if you're lucky—but it won't get you the referral you need to build the business. But networking **can** be a valuable first step because it can help you find and build what you need—*relationships*. Relationships can, with the right care and feeding, lead to strong referrals that will grow your practice.

Therefore, the real question we need to look at is how to build relationships. You'll notice

that I didn't say "business relationships" or "professional relationships." That's because there is really only one kind of relationship—a personal one. Yes, it's true that not all relationships are created equal. But the first key to building your practice is understanding that the basic building blocks of a relationship are the same regardless of whether it is business or not.

It's All about Trust and Knowledge

Relationships are built on trust and knowledge. Strong relationships require significant amounts of both elements. Without the cornerstones of trust and knowledge referrals simply won't happen.

Trust is about integrity and expertise. The person giving you the referral must have trust in you as a person, that your word is your bond and that, above all you will take good care of the relationship you've been entrusted. Trust is also about expertise. The person giving you that referral must know that you have the skills and experience necessary to really help the other person. This makes sense, right? Would you want to be referred to someone if the person making the connection didn't have this level of trust in

(continued on page 43)

Building Your Practice (Continued from page 36)

the receiver?

Knowledge of **what** you do and **why** you are doing it are the other essential elements for effective referrals. Your network must know with some specificity **what** you do, and it needs to be from their perspective, not your perspective. This means presenting yourself in terms of “problems you solve” as opposed to “areas in which you practice.” For instance, if you label yourself as a “real estate attorney” you make a huge assumption—that the person you’re talking to understands what that means and when and why they ought to make a referral! As an alternative, use stories to describe your work and the client problems you solved. This makes your message more meaningful and memorable for the person who needs to think of you when a particular situation arises.

The second element of knowledge is your “Why.” If you really want to make a connec-

tion with someone, you want to know why they’re doing something, right? If not, you should. Author Simon Sinek has a compelling message on why “starting with why” is essential for inspiring action.¹ If someone trusts you, and they know what you do and why you do it then they are will not only be prepared to help you, they will actively **try** to help because of your relationship.

Practice Tips: 4 Rules for Building Trust and Knowledge

1. Stop Transmitting and Start Listening. Take a genuine interest in others and be authentic. The canned elevator pitch isn’t authentic. Allow yourself to be present and really listen. It’s amazing how much more you’ll learn when you really engage in a meeting, rather than thinking ahead about what **you** will say when it is **your** turn

2. Be Generous and Never, Ever Keep Score. Approach relationships with a generous mind and heart. It is not about the transaction. Scorekeepers turn things into quid pro quo, become greedy and don’t generally succeed. How willing are you to give something of real value to a scorekeeper?

3. Handle with Care. Take care of a relationship and it will survive and grow over the long term. Go the extra mile and do something unexpected and genuine when someone helps you—or for no reason at all. Send a card or a copy of your favorite book. Maybe even an iTunes gift card. Or maybe it’s just a phone call out of the blue to say “Hello.” And don’t think that connecting by e-mail or “social media” is the same as a human moment. It isn’t.

4. Know Your Story and Your Why. Be able to relate who you are and why you do what you do in a succinct way that people understand. No matter how strong the relationship, if people don’t know when and why to make a referral they can’t help you. **CL**

Notes

1. To learn more about Simon’s approach go to www.startwithwhy.com and watch the video about *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*.