

# HOW TO START AND BUILD AN IMMIGRATION PRACTICE WITHIN A MEDIUM TO LARGE SIZED LAW FIRM

By Joel H. Paget  
Ryan Swanson & Cleveland, PLLC  
Seattle, Washington

Even though you may have been hired in a particular practice area within a medium to large law firm you still can build a successful immigration practice. While you are doing so, you can enjoy the benefits of having staff support and financial security. However, there are some strategies you can adopt that will help you build your practice faster and better.

## **I. General Commitment of the Firm.**

As an associate or member of a medium sized law firm you already have office space, staff and supplies. However you need the commitment of the firm for you to develop an immigration practice while still maintaining a practice area for which you were hired or have already developed. In order to “justify” your commitment to this practice area you will need to show the executive committee it pays the firm to be involved. Thus, you should ask the firm to assign a code classification to all of your immigration work so that you can readily track the number of client dollars received by the firm for your hours worked by type of matter. Most medium to large firms bill by the hour, so if you do charge a flat fee for immigration work you still will need to record your hours in order to show the profitability of the flat fee arrangements. Given the current literature regarding alternative fee arrangements, you may find yourself on the cutting edge of fee arrangements for the firm.

The firm will probably have an information systems manager who looks after the computer system needs of the firm. You will need to develop a close working relationship with this person so that you can have your immigration related software made part of the system. This will become more important as you add additional people who need to have common access to the same software programs. Most of the immigration software programs on the market include a word processing program, a time/billing program, and a calendar system. These will be different than what the firm already has so you will need to modify your system to make it compatible to the overall firm’s programs.

Some firms have a toll free number for their clients to use. You should use the firm's toll free number on your business cards and use it to your advantage to facilitate contact with out of state clients.

You also should develop a relationship with the firm's librarian and the partner in charge of library expenditures. Ask these people what kind of budget you could have each year to build the immigration library. Matthew Bender's classic treatise, *Gordan Mailman*, should be the anchor then you can add additional resources as you go. Obviously the internet, especially through the American Immigration Lawyers Association, can offer you access to a number of other materials.

One publication you should not do without is Interpreter Releases. It is a weekly publication which covers the constant change within the immigration law practice.

## **II. Presenting a Professional Image.**

The firm has probably already invested substantially in creating a firm image. However, you will need to create your own subset of materials which highlight your immigration practice.

This is the age of accessibility. Thus, you should advertise your accessibility by way of cellular phone, pager, facsimile. Be sure you change your voicemail daily so your clients know your schedule. Have your assistant screen your telephone calls, send out client intake forms and schedule conferences.

Work with your receptionist and your assistant/secretary to make sure they are aware of how you want your calls handled, especially by some clients who may have difficulty in stating what their particular needs are or who they are looking for.

## **III. Marketing.**

Your business cards in the state of Washington cannot indicate that you are a specialist in immigration law, but you can have on the reverse side printed with a translation of your card in a language spoken by a majority of your immigration clients.

Be sure to meet with each of the groups, departments or divisions of the law firm to explain your immigration practice and how they could cross-market for you. Remind them often of your services. Also, review the firm's list of major clients and look for opportunities to inform each of them that you are offering immigration services. Do not think they will automatically ask your firm when an immigration need occurs.

You could develop a newsletter to send to all of the firm's clients that are being billed in a particular month/quarter. This newsletter should go out at least twice, if not four times, a year. News should be relevant and recent and short enough to be read by a busy person.

The firm also should be approached to allow you to have a marketing budget which would allow you to travel to the countries where you want to concentrate your practice. This may include the Far East, Canada, Mexico or even Europe. Take another partner along on such trips to cross-market and become acquainted with the other person's contacts.

#### **IV. Keeping Up With the Changes in Immigration Law.**

Again the firm should have a CLE/marketing budget which would allow you to attend many of the AILA conferences or other immigration law CLEs.

You also should read the Interpreter Releases and the AILA Monthly Bulletin as soon as it arrives in order to keep current. You also should access the AILA Infonet daily, if not weekly, to find current information.

Also attend the monthly chapter meetings of the AILA State Chapter and attend INS Liaison Meetings whenever possible to gain information about the local practice.