

Developing a personal brand during articles

Written by Sasha Toten Posted Date: January 6, 2014

The purpose of articling is primarily to provide law students with 10 months of legal training before becoming licensed lawyers. Understandably, the focus is often on developing the skills required to draft documents, research points of law, or prepare a closing agenda.

A sometimes overlooked practical skill, however, is the ability to network and build your own brand as a lawyer.

I attended a luncheon on the topic of building a personal brand hosted by Young Women in the Law, a Toronto-based not-for-profit that supports female lawyers beginning their career. The speakers were Carrie Heller, president of the Heller Group Legal and Executive Search; Deborah Glatter, director of Professional Development and Student Programs at Cassels Brock & Blackwell LLP; and Sheena MacAskill, a legal consultant who focuses on performance coaching, career transition, and development training.



These women are well-versed in networking and brand building. While the discussion was geared toward women professionals at all stages of their careers, they provided helpful advice that should be heeded by articling students as we begin building our careers.

Students do not usually focus on finding a way to stand out to clients in the sea of practitioners because it is hard to imagine ourselves as lawyers yet. A personal brand is not only required to gain the trust and business of clients, it's also helpful to establish relationships among colleagues. All of which is worth learning how to do as early in our careers as possible.

When our networks clearly understand who we are and what we are passionate about, they are more likely to approach us for work and refer people to us.

Before getting started, the speakers emphasized the importance of determining our strengths, and how to play to those strengths both in the workplace and in networking opportunities. More importantly, they noted how critical it is to understand our weaknesses.

They advised taking time to identify our top five values (such as loyalty, or trust) and how to incorporate them into our practice — not only in how we seek work, but also how we conduct ourselves. Then, we should check in with ourselves every six months to make sure we are heading in the right direction.

The speakers said we should create a personal brand separate from our firm or office brand. As easy as it is to adopt our articling firm's identity, our personal career goals are usually more refined or specific than the firm's. This is not to say we should not identify or promote our firm's brand, but have our own as well since our personal brand is part of the value we can add to the firm.

One of the more obvious ways to gain exposure is through social media. Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have all turned into platforms for professionals to expand their network, build relationships, and attract potential clients (or even seek jobs). It is also important to monitor our online presence to be aware of what is out there about us.

Branding does not have to be limited to one practice area. Instead, the speakers advised everyone build a brand so people can identify the transferable skills we have and how they may be useful for different kinds of work. When describing skills on professional sites, such as LinkedIn, don't be too brief so that others can get a concrete sense of our abilities.

Building a presence online is not the only networking platform. Attending internal firm events, as well as external events such as conferences and fundraisers, are other ways to get our name out there.

In terms of getting work, the speakers made it clear we should be willing to seek out and ask for the type of work we want — be it from lawyers working in that area within the firm, or directly from clients once we get to that stage in our career.

Networking and brand building are important to our careers, but can certainly seem somewhat amorphous at the start. If we break it down and give thought to our short- and long-term goals, then perhaps it will seem less daunting. Looking to our personal and professional mentors to ask how they approach networking and building their own brand also helps. Turning to those who have mastered their own career marketing can be a goldmine. No matter the strategy, it takes time to figure out what we want our brand to look like and how best to execute it, so we may as well get going!

Sasha Toten is an articling student at Bennett Jones LLP in the Toronto office.