

LAWYERS JOURNAL

L A W P R A C T I C E M A N A G E M E N T

You've decided to go out on your own. Now what?

By Amy Mann

Ever think about going solo? Virtually all attorneys have thought about it; many have done it.

The ACBA partners at LawPay have worked with countless attorneys over the past decade who have taken the leap and started their own firms. If you're thinking about going off on your own and hanging your own shingle, here are a few pieces of practical advice that can help make your new venture a success.

Make a Plan

Whether you worked in a larger firm or you're fresh out of law school, starting your own practice is going to come with a host of responsibilities you've never dealt with before. Lots of attorneys who start their own firm realize very soon that while law school taught them to be excellent attorneys, it didn't teach them how to run a business.

Before you start attracting clients and taking cases, you should make a detailed plan for running your firm, including:

- Creating a formal business plan
- Buying necessary office supplies
- Investing in legal software

You may also consider talking to various professionals who can inform different parts of your business plan, including cybersecurity experts, legal research providers, investment managers, and other attorneys who have successfully started their own practices.

View a full list of such partners at the ACBA's Expert and Vendor Guide, available at ACBA.org/EVG.

Take Advantage of Technology

Taking advantage of existing technology is a must when setting up your firm. For example, rather than investing in a large, expensive copy/fax machine, get an affordable, desktop printer/scanner and make the jump to digital communications rather than relying so much on paper.

There is incredible legal technology that exists solely to make your life easier. Many online legal tools were specifically developed to help solo and small firms run efficiently even with a small staff and a small budget.

Some options include full-service practice management software, online credit card processing/payment solutions, document automation software, client intake software, lead generating resources, invoicing/billing tools and more.

Here, too, the ACBA has vetted such partners in the Expert and Vendor Guide at ACBA.org/EVG.

Choose Your Practice Area Focus

A common mistake among attorneys starting their own firm is that they think being a general practitioner is the safest way to drum up a large client base. Unfortunately, trying to be everything to everyone will limit your ability to truly become an expert in your field and can open you up to potential malpractice and liability risks.

Choose a practice area and focus on it. If you have multiple areas of interest, you may benefit from doing some simple market research in your targeted area of service to see if any particular practice areas are underrepresented. Once you focus your practice, you can build a reputation as a "go-to" attorney for whatever it is you select.

Speaking of liability, you'll need good Lawyers Professional Liability Insurance. Actually, if you're on your own, you won't have the benefit of a big firm benefits plan, so you'll likely need health insurance and similar benefits. Be sure to check out the options available from USI through the ACBA Insurance Program. More info is available at ACBA.org/Insurance.

Take Marketing Seriously

Take the time to learn some legal marketing best practices and handle your marketing yourself, at least initially. The first thing you need to do from a marketing standpoint is to build a professional-looking website. The internet is the main way that people will search for a lawyer, and potential clients will make lots of assumptions about you based on the appearance of your website.

Fortunately, the ACBA offers significant discounts on custom sites designed by emBold (Check out ACBA.org/websites to learn more).

Once you have a sleek, professional website, you can start marketing your practice. Some simple and free/ low-cost ways you can market your practice include:

- Regularly add rich, meaningful content to your website to help improve your site's search engine rankings
- Contribute content to industry publications to help build your reputation
- Network on professional social networking sites like LinkedIn and attend local networking events
- Cultivate strong relationships with current and former clients to try and secure repeat business and referrals

- Take advantage of the fact that thousands of people call the ACBA looking for an attorney by joining the ACBA Lawyer Referral Service. For a strikingly-low price, you can be on the panel of attorneys the bar association refers to the public when they reach out looking for a lawyer. Visit GetAPittsburghLawyer.com to learn more.

Once you establish a steady cash flow for your practice, you'll be able to explore other paid marketing opportunities.

Leave Your Current Job in the Right Way

If you're leaving an existing firm to go off on your own, remember that it's extremely important to leave in the right way. Don't burn bridges or bad-mouth your old firm and try not to leave in the middle of a large project. Make sure you give your employer plenty of notice; two weeks is the standard, but you may want to give more if circumstances warrant doing so.

Additionally, there could be legal requirements involved in leaving an existing firm, including fiduciary duties. Consider meeting with a business lawyer and with your state bar to make sure you aren't forgetting any requirements or responsibilities.

More Info

This is just a sampling. For more tips and information on starting your own firm, download LawPay's free e-book, "Going Off On our Own: Your Guide to Running a Model Firm" at ACBA.org/GoingSolo. ■

Thinking of Going Solo?

LawPay Will Waive Monthly Fee

Are you considering opening a solo law office? The ACBA partners at LawPay are committed to supporting attorneys in their professional pursuit, including opening their own firms.

LawPay helps attorneys get paid. If you're thinking about becoming a solo practitioner, LawPay will waive your monthly program fee for a full year. For more info, visit ACBA.org/LawPay.