

How to Build a Successful Practice: Four Things That Don't Work and 14 Things That Do

By Natalie Armstrong-Motin

Building a successful practice takes a lot of effort and a little bit of money. Second only to being a good mediator, having the mindset of an entrepreneur is probably the most important component. Knowing where and how to spend your resources (and just as importantly where not to) will give you an advantage.

The list below is by no means complete, but it does cover the priorities.

What Doesn't Work

1. Paying for advertising, including internet advertising like banner ads, Google ads, LinkedIn ads, Facebook ads, and so on unless you have an unlimited budget. Even then, it's not the most effective way to gain clients.
2. Volunteering for too long hoping that cases will materialize. Let me use one of my clients, Phyllis, as the example. In a first consultation with her I asked for her volunteer stats. Here they are:

5 cases per month for two years, or 120 cases

3 hours free for each case, or 360 hours mediating

2 hours admin for each case, or 240 hours of admin

2 hours of commute / parking for each case, or 240 hours

Total of 840 hours

Phyllis charges \$300 per hour in her private practice.

Her 'practice development' through the court panel has cost her \$252,000 over two years!!!

How many paying cases has she directly received for her 'volunteer' efforts? The answer is 5. FIVE!!! Is it worth it? Nope. No way. Not worth it.

3. Waiting for the phone to ring. You have to be pro-active and market your business every day
4. Negativity – in any way shape or form

What Works

- 1.** Do something every day. Every day
- 2.** Have a client-centered practice. Exemplify good business manners, Write thank you notes, Treat clients like guests, or better yet royalty. Give clients a little extra without charging them. Clients hate to be nickel and dimed. Make your fees as straightforward and as all-inclusive as possible so that clients are never surprised by the bill. Provide good, thorough, accurate follow up work. For example, send out detailed summary letters after the session with interim agreements and a 'to do' list for between session action items.
- 3.** Always be ready to connect. Be easy to work with. Be easy to contact. Be easy to find. Have a content-generous web site that is easy to navigate and easy to use to contact you. Carry business cards with all of your current contact information with you at all times. Refine your elevator pitch.
- 4.** Use publicity, not advertising
- 5.** Specialize in one or two fields, and market those skills to target groups rather than generalizing
- 6.** Tirelessly follow up in a tasteful way with prospective clients
- 7.** Anticipate your client's concerns and address them in advance, no matter how simple. Example: send out a map with directions to your office and suggestions for parking, coffee shops, etc. with your information package.
- 8.** Schedule a speaking gig, submit an article, or train. Provide specific trainings for your clients and prospects (for continuing education credits if available). Publish articles. Guest blog
- 9.** Actively participate on a panel or committee that is otherwise populated with your prospects and gatekeepers. Working directly with and for your primary or secondary target market's associations gives you numerous reasons to be in direct contact with the people most likely to hire you. These interactions let your prospective clients know that you are a likable professional that they can trust with their cases. No marketing campaign in the world could be more effective than you just being your sincere self.
- 10.** Under promise and over perform
- 11.** Use and stay up to date with technology. Let your clients know that you are ahead of the curve, not behind the times. Finding and using in a masterful way software or apps that make working with you and working for yourself easier, more efficient, more effective, and even more fun can make a big difference. I happen to love Acuity Scheduling for an easy online calendar, Zoom for meetings, Canva.com for creating beautiful graphics for my clients. Being able to accept credit cards for payment with Stripe, Paypal, or Square means clients can earn miles and

pay for your services. Think too about accepting direct payment through your bank with services like Venmo or Zelle.

12. Make best use of social media marketing. Share lots of good stuff regularly. Within each email, post, and profile, include the link or icon to all your social media accounts. If you're giving valuable information to readers / listeners, they will naturally follow you. A good start is to follow your clients and prospective clients first. Keep your social media marketing consistent with who you are and who you want to be in your practice. Building connections for direct communication on social media platforms lets prospective clients learn that they can trust us with their cases and reminds previous clients of our professionalism, authority, and credibility.

13. Send out evaluation forms and modify your practice based on the feedback.

14. Most importantly: realize that you are a businessperson who specializes in mediation, not a mediator trying to build a practice. Read business and marketing books. Attend business and marketing seminars. Find and download podcasts about legal marketing, practice building, or entrepreneurship. Watch YouTube videos about marketing, entrepreneurship, or anything else you're curious about. For example, learn how to launch a podcast or YouTube channel, how to optimize your LinkedIn profile, how to price your services, publish your book, and so much more.

For any or all of the activities listed above, the key is to do something. Do something every day for yourself and your practice or your prospective clients. You'll find that there's a cumulative effect leading to an exponential growth in people contacting you as a resource, asking you to write an article, speak to their group, provide a training, or best of all, hire you to mediate their case.

What will you do today?

Mrs. Armstrong-Motin is the author of "The Essential Guide to Marketing Your ADR Practice". She is frequently invited to speak around the globe on the successful marketing strategies of the resolution and legal industry. As a personal consultant to many of the premier providers in the ADR industry, her company, Marketing Resolution, has designed and developed hundreds of campaigns for private practices, firms, educational institutions, authors, organizations and associations around the world.

Mrs. Armstrong-Motin has received certificates in both Mediation and Arbitration from the Institute of Conflict Management and International Mediation from both Tulane University School of Law and Humboldt University School of Law in Berlin Germany. She has received nearly 150 hours in training in numerous national and international mediation, arbitration and communication courses. Mrs. Armstrong-Motin's professional education background is in conflict resolution, sociology and criminal psychology.

She was Vice President of the Southern California Mediation Association and Chair of the Membership Committee, a member of the Board of the London Club. Mrs. Armstrong-Motin has served on the Board of the California Dispute Resolution Council. For the American Bar Association's Dispute Resolution Section she served as Vice-Chair of Practice Development Committee and as the Co-Chair of the Standing Committee for Practice, Business and Skills Development.