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What the most successful rainmakers know about building a practice

Farone Advisors' Deborah Farone highlights three key themes from her recent book about how successful women lawyers can build thriving practices



Deborah Farone

When I set out to research my book 'Breaking Ground: How Successful Women Lawyers Build Thriving Practices' (PLI, January 2026), I did not know exactly what I would find. What I did know was that women across the profession were building remarkable client relationships and generating significant business, often in ways that defied conventional wisdom about what a rainmaker should look or sound like. Over the course of 60 in-depth interviews with women lawyers from firms and organisations around the world, three themes emerged so consistently that they deserve to be understood not as soft observations, but as strategic principles.

The first is authenticity.

Time and again, the women I interviewed described approaches to client development that were entirely their own. They were not working from a template or trying to replicate someone else's style. One partner might build her practice through deep involvement in a professional association. Another might rely on writing and speaking. A third might focus almost exclusively on a small number of longstanding relationships, cultivating them with extraordinary care. **What they shared was not a method, but a mindset: the conviction that business development works best when it grows naturally from who you are.**

This matters because so much of the conventional advice handed to lawyers about winning clients assumes a universal approach. Attend the right events. Make the calls. Follow the formula. But the women in my research were not following formulas. They

were paying attention to what came naturally to them, where their energy was highest and where they genuinely added value beyond their legal expertise. The result was not just effectiveness, but sustainability. A business development practice built around your authentic strengths is one you can maintain over a career.

The second theme is trust, and it may be the most important word in the book.

It came up in nearly every interview, across practice areas, firm sizes and geographies. Clients hire lawyers they trust. Clients stay with lawyers they trust. Clients refer other clients to lawyers they trust. And yet trust is often treated as something that simply accrues over time, rather than something that can be actively cultivated.

What the women I interviewed understood, often quite explicitly, is that trust is built on three elements: expertise, authenticity and empathy. Expertise is the baseline. Clients must believe you know what you are doing, and in today's market that means not only technical excellence but also a genuine understanding of the client's business, industry and goals. Authenticity means that clients sense they are dealing with a real person who is honest with them, not a performer playing a role. And empathy means that clients feel heard and understood, that their lawyer grasps not just the legal problem but the human stakes behind it.

None of these elements operates in isolation. A lawyer who is technically brilliant but lacks warmth may earn respect but not loyalty. A lawyer who is warm and personable but not credible on the substance will not hold clients through difficult matters. It is the combination, expressed consistently over time, that creates the kind of trust that generates and sustains a practice.

The third theme is the long-term view.

Building a thriving practice is not a campaign. It is a commitment. The women I spoke with understood this deeply, and many had structured their professional lives accordingly.

Lise Lotte Hjerrild, a partner at Hortendahl in Denmark, offered one of the clearest expressions of this principle. She described making a point of doing something for business development every single day, whether that meant reaching out to a prospective client, following up with an existing one or simply staying visible in her professional community. Not a grand gesture each day, but a consistent, deliberate action. Over months and years, that accumulates into something powerful.

This systematic approach reflects a broader truth that emerged from the research: some clients will not be ready to hire you when you first meet them. They may not yet be in a position of authority, or they may have an existing relationship they are not ready to move away from, or the need for your specific expertise may not yet have arisen. The lawyers who build the most durable practices are the ones who understand this and

who invest in relationships without expectation of immediate return. They stay in touch. **They add value before they are engaged.** They make themselves easy to call when the moment finally comes.

Taken together, these three principles form a coherent picture of what distinguished practice development looks like in the profession today. It is not about volume of activity or the size of one's network in the abstract. It is about the quality of relationships, built on trust, expressed authentically and sustained over the long arc of a career.

What struck me most, speaking with these extraordinary lawyers, was the generosity with which they shared what they had learned. Many described having had to figure things out on their own, often without role models or sponsors who looked like them. The opportunity to gather their insights and put them in conversation with one another felt genuinely important.

The lessons they offered are not only for women, and not only for lawyers. Anyone whose work depends on building relationships of trust over time will find something here. But for women in the legal profession navigating a still-uneven landscape, the voices in 'Breaking Ground' offer something more specific: proof that there is not one way to succeed, and that the path you build in your own way, according to your own strengths, may well be the most effective one of all.

Deborah's book is available on Amazon or at a discount at www.pli.edu/breakinggroundbook.

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