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From Public Service to Private Practice: Using the Media as a Business Development Tool

By Susan Jacobsen

For some, the transition from public service to private law practice can be seamless, while for others, building a substantial book of business can be more of a challenge. Recently, opportunities were secured for one attorney who had been a senior official with the CIA. By capitalizing on her expertise as a legal advisor to the U.S. intelligence community, interviews were generated for topics from encryption policies and the threat of terrorism to nuclear proliferation and the role of the CIA.

She began her media appearances first with The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and Christian Science Monitor. The second phase of the strategy including creating opinion and editorial placements in newspapers such as Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, and Seattle-Post Intelligencer. Later, her increased news profile was turned into television appearances on media such as ABC World News Tonight and the History Channel.

How was this accomplished? By catering the publicity program to her business development goals, ensuring that the right message reached the appropriate audience, and increasing the frequency of national media placements. Working as a partner versus being employed by the government brings with it new responsibilities and distinct differences. Generating new business leads, initiating billable hours, and contributing to the firm's overall revenue were musts as she entered the world of private law practice.

While traditional lead generation tactics should be instituted (e.g., mail, announcements, referrals, etc.), attorneys making the shift should recognize that the notoriety they bring with them into private practice is often, by itself, not enough to translate into as large a stream of business as desired. By having the added credentials associated with her prior involvement with the CIA, she had an advantage in that she was one step ahead in establishing credibility with reporters. By tracking the news and identifying and securing interest amongst the reporters covering issues of importance to her clients and prospects, media opportunities were leveraged to her advantage. She provided third-party commentary on breaking news, offered information on background

regarding the intelligence community, and contributed first-hand knowledge of issues related to national security and encryption policies.

The incorporation of media relations and publicity into this attorney's business development efforts enabled her to increasingly attract business and help the firm to capture more market share. The key to this success was tying the attorney to issues that were hot news items rather than trying to draw media attention to her personality. For any attorney making a similar transition, particular focus should be placed on identifying future business opportunities consistent with their prior government or congressional areas of expertise. In turn, this increased exposure will reach the audiences most interested in what the attorney and firm have to sell.