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Finding C.H.I.L.L. Referral Partners to Increase Your Referrals

By Stephen E. Seckler

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80 percent of life is showing up. —Woody Allen

If you want to marry someone Jewish, don't hang out at Catholic singles dances. —Stephen E. Seckler (based on similar quotes from unknown sources)

My three adult children all attended a private middle school. We actually live in a community that is well known for its high-quality public schools. In fact, all three of them attended our public elementary school. They even graduated from our public high school, but my wife and I were concerned that middle school was the weak link. Instead, we opted for much smaller class sizes and an inclusive culture that we thought would be beneficial to each of them.

I want to spend more time organizing files manually...

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mycase

We have no real way of knowing how things might have turned out if they had gone to the public middle school. There are no do-overs in raising your kids. From an educational perspective, though, we feel that we got our money's worth.

As it turns out, there were some other benefits of being part of this community.

While there were plenty of other middle-class families like us at the school, we were also introduced to many families with tremendous wealth. These were the one-percenters who are well-connected in law, business, the life sciences, financial services, and many other industries.

In theory, it was great for my business to meet these parents. Over time, some of these relationships did bear fruit. I met a number of parents who eventually became my clients, and I did generate some referrals. (See my May 2022 *GPSolo eReport* article "[Monetizing Your Children and Your Pets to Grow Your Law Practice](#)" for more on this topic.)

But during our six-year run at the school, I actually generated a lot more business outside of the rarefied world of private school. Despite the fact that many of these parents were well-connected and had great networks, getting to know them better was not a priority for me. I was not motivated to deepen our relationship.

By the time our last child headed back to our public high school, I had reached the conclusion that meeting people who are well positioned to help you does not mean that they will want to help you or that relationships with them are ones you want to cultivate. Authentic relationship building requires more.

Relationship Building Is Key in Marketing and in Career Advancement

I speak all the time with my clients about the importance of building authentic relationships. Relationships are important for career advancement and for building your business. Being good at what you do will only get you so far. No one achieves success on their own.

But how do you decide where to focus your energy? How do you know what relationships to build?

Your time is a limited resource. Spending time on activities that are unlikely to have a short-term benefit is particularly challenging when you have plenty of billable work to do. And whether you are working for other lawyers or trying to build your own practice, you want to be strategic in deciding how to manage the time you spend on relationship building.

I have come up with an acronym to help you be more strategic in your relationship building. The acronym is C.H.I.L.L. You can use C.H.I.L.L. to triage those relationships that are worth cultivating and those relationships that look good on paper but are less likely to help you build your practice.

Before I get to that, I want to say just a little more about relationship building. While I am focusing here on identifying the types of people who can be helpful to you, an important part of relationship building is finding ways that you can be helpful to others. And just because you don't see an obvious way for someone to be helpful to you in the short run, I am not trying to suggest that you should avoid or ignore those people altogether. Sometimes it's just nice to be a helpful person. Also, there is a Jewish expression: You never know when you will meet your wife or your wife's sister.

So, Who Are C.H.I.L.L. Referral Partners?

C.H.I.L.L. stands for Capacity, Helpful, Integrity, Likeable, and Low-Hanging Fruit.

People who are C.H.I.L.L. have:

- Capacity to help
- A Helpful mindset
- Integrity
- They are Likeable
- And the best place to start is with the Low-Hanging Fruit.

Know Your Ideal Client and Who Has the Capacity to Make Referrals

In thinking about where to focus your networking energy, the starting point should always be figuring out who is your ideal client. If you know what kinds of clients you are trying to serve and who are the other professionals who work with the same clients, then you can be much more focused on seeking out the *right* people to connect with.

For example, if you focus on handling business disputes between partners of closely held businesses, then corporate lawyers who represent these types of businesses may have the capacity to refer work to you. This is true especially if there is no one in their firm who is a litigator.

Similarly, accountants who do tax work and general corporate accounting for similar businesses are good referral partners.

If you focus on domestic relations, then therapists are probably good referral sources.

Not Everyone Has a Helpful Mindset

Knowing that someone has the capacity to be helpful is a good starting point. But not everyone *is* helpful.

I have met a lot of recruiters over the years. In fact, I was a recruiter for more than two decades. I know that recruiters are speaking all the time to lawyers they can't place. I know they are frequently speaking to law firm leaders who want to develop their talent. Recruiters have the capacity to refer me work that they don't do. I have the capacity to refer them candidates and employers for legal searches.

But not every recruiter I meet has a helpful mindset. Some are singularly focused on connecting with lawyers they can place right now or legal employers who have an immediate need to find talent. Meeting other professionals is not a priority for them. I learned this the hard way by trying to cultivate a relationship with a recruiter who ended every conversation with "Sorry, Steve, I have to take this" (and "this" was always some hot candidate or "valued" law firm client—i.e., not me).

So, I focus on those recruiters who want to be helpful to the lawyers they can't place. Those are the recruiters who take the long view. I spend my time with recruiters who genuinely enjoy making referrals and who ask the right questions that might elicit a need I can fulfill.

I Is for Integrity

The *I* in the acronym stands for integrity. You may identify people who have the capacity to help you and who have a helpful mindset. Despite this, some people never follow through on anything.

If somebody wants to help, but they never do what they say they're going to do, maybe they aren't the best people to spend time with.

Similarly, if you're trying to build relationships with other professionals who serve the same industry, focus on those professionals who you think will be trustworthy enough to do a good job for your clients. You want to make referrals to professionals with integrity.

The First L Stands for Likeable

Are these individuals whom you connect with organically? Do you like them? Do they share your values?

In my example, when my kids were in middle school, I did meet some parents who shared my interests and whom I genuinely liked. But there were definitely some who seemed to be in a position to help me but who did not share my values. Cultivating those relationships did not feel authentic. So, I learned quickly not to invest a lot of time and energy getting to know them even if my kids were friendly with their kids.

Start with the Low-Hanging Fruit

The best people to cultivate relationships with are the people whom you already have a strong relationship with. These are your friends, former classmates, people who belong to the same church or synagogue, family members, former colleagues, former clients, or existing clients who are happy with the services that you are providing.

These are the people who already know, like, and trust you. These are the people who can really help you build up your network the most quickly and on whom it will be easiest for you to focus your energy.

Stick with C.H.I.L.L. Professionals over Time

If you focus on building authentic relationships with professionals who have both the capacity to help and a helpful mindset, you are more likely to generate referrals. If you connect with the people you like who do what they say they are going to do, you will end up with more inbound traffic.

Just remember, staying top of mind over time is crucial in generating referrals. So, find ways to keep your connections warm and start with the low-hanging fruit. They are the people who are most committed to your success.

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