How Lawyers Can Overcome Their Aversion to Sales: What Would Aristotle Say?

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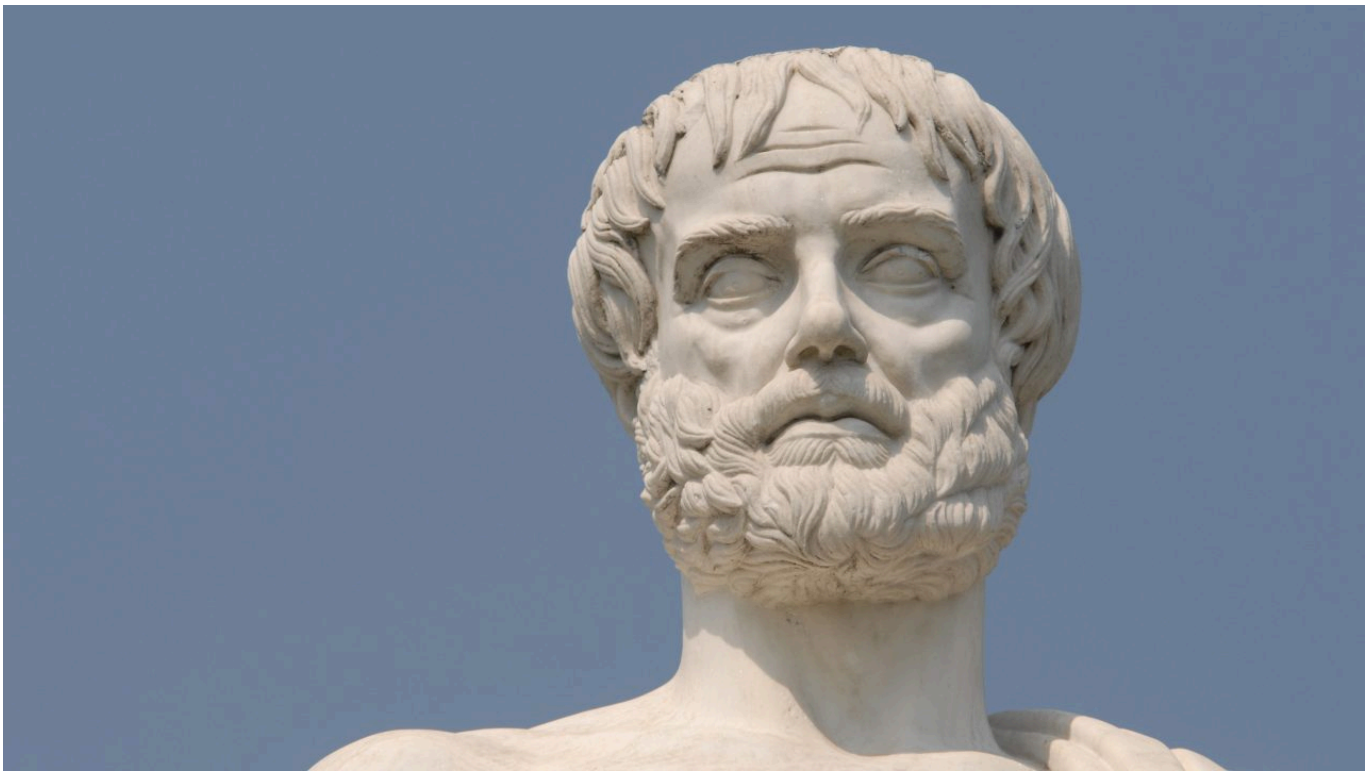
Summary

- Aristotle believed we become who we are through action. We don't need to feel like marketers to start marketing. We take action first. The mindset follows.
- Many of the traits that make us great lawyers can quietly undermine our ability to build relationships and generate work.
- Acting like an entrepreneur doesn't mean changing our personalities. It means making different choices about how we show up.
- If we consistently reach out to people, show genuine interest in them, follow up over time, and put ourselves in situations where relationships can develop, we will build our practices.



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Shortly after I published my book, *Think Like a Lawyer, Act Like an Entrepreneur*, I learned that some of the ideas in it are actually rooted in the ancient wisdom of Aristotle.

Who knew?

I certainly didn't, at least not until a client of mine (Brian Reilly, a partner at the firm Partridge, Snow, and Hahn) read the book and made the connection for me. He pointed out that Aristotle believed we become who we are through action. We don't wait to feel brave before acting bravely. We act, and over time, we become brave.

That observation stopped me in my tracks, because it perfectly captures what I've been trying to teach lawyers for years. We don't need to feel like marketers to start marketing. We don't need to feel confident, extroverted, or entrepreneurial. We take action first. The mindset follows.

That said, I don't think Aristotle gets the last word here, at least not when it comes to lawyers.

Where Aristotle and I Part Ways

Aristotle might suggest that if we act like an entrepreneur long enough, we eventually become one. I'm not convinced that's necessary. Most of us don't need to fundamentally

change who we are. We don't need to become "salespeople," and we don't need to adopt a completely different identity.

But we do need to change how we behave.

That distinction is critical. We can still think like lawyers, be skeptical, analytical, risk-averse, and build very successful practices. But we need to be intentional about when those instincts help us and when they get in our way.

Why We Gravitate Toward the Billable Hour

Part of the challenge is structural. We are wired to focus on what is right in front of us, and the billable hour reinforces that instinct. We do the work, we record the time, and there is an immediate and tangible reward. It feels productive. It feels efficient. It feels safe.

By contrast, most marketing activities have a delayed payoff. Writing an article, speaking on a panel, serving on a nonprofit board, or posting on LinkedIn rarely leads to immediate results. We might not see any return for months or even years (or ever). That uncertainty makes it easy to push those activities aside in favor of work that produces a clear and immediate outcome.

The irony is that the long-term success of our practices depends on those very activities that feel the least urgent. The lawyers who consistently invest time in relationship-building and visibility are the ones who create a steady stream of opportunities down the road.

When Thinking Like a Lawyer Gets in the Way

The uncomfortable truth is that many of the traits that make us great lawyers can quietly undermine our ability to build relationships and generate work.

We sit down with a potential client for coffee, and within minutes, we're telling them about their potential legal risks. From our perspective, we're being helpful and efficient. From their perspective, we may be overwhelming them or failing to connect with them at all. A more effective approach is to slow down, ask questions, and let them talk. We should show interest in them, not just their legal issue, and earn the right to offer our expertise later.

In another conversation, someone shares a thought, maybe about a business issue, maybe something far less consequential, such as where to go for lunch or what they have

been watching lately. Our instinct is to refine it or challenge it. “Yes, but have you considered. . . ?” slips out almost automatically.

That instinct is incredibly useful when we’re negotiating a deal or preparing for litigation. In everyday interactions, however, it can feel dismissive. If someone tells us they loved a new restaurant or a show they just watched, the goal is not to cross-examine them. A simple “That’s interesting, tell me more” keeps the conversation going. (For the record, I think *The Pitt* and *Shrinking* are great shows. That’s an objective fact.)

Then there’s the tendency to overthink. We draft a LinkedIn post and revise it five times before deciding not to publish it. We debate whether to follow up with someone we met at an event and decide to wait for a better moment. We spend more time thinking about marketing than actually doing it. Meanwhile, the lawyers who are building practices are simply taking small, consistent actions. They send the email, they make the call, they post the article—not perfectly, just consistently.

Skepticism can also work against us. We hear about a conference or a networking opportunity and immediately think about the downside. What if it’s a waste of time? What if nothing comes from it? That instinct is part of what makes us good lawyers, but it can cause us to miss opportunities that don’t have an obvious or immediate payoff. Business development rarely follows a straight line, and the most valuable relationships often come from unexpected places.

And then there’s urgency. We reach out to someone we know, suggest getting together, and when they say they’re busy, we follow up again a week later. From our perspective, we’re being proactive. From their perspective, it may feel like pressure. Relationships develop on their own timeline, not ours. Sometimes the most effective approach is to give things space and stay in touch over time.

What Acting Like an Entrepreneur Actually Looks Like

Acting like an entrepreneur doesn’t mean changing our personalities. It means making different choices about how we show up. It means following up, even when it feels slightly uncomfortable, and staying on someone’s radar without a specific agenda. It means investing in relationships without expecting an immediate return and trusting that those efforts will compound over time.

It means focusing on being helpful rather than impressive. Asking, “How can I be useful to you?” is often more powerful than trying to demonstrate how much we know. It also means taking small risks on a regular basis, reaching out to someone new, attending an event, or sharing an idea publicly—all without overanalyzing the outcome.

Perhaps most importantly, it means prioritizing connection over being right. In legal work, being right is everything. In business development, being trusted and relatable matters more.

We Don't Need to Feel Different. We Need to Act Differently

This is where the message comes together. We may never feel like marketers. We may never identify as entrepreneurs. That's fine.

But if we consistently reach out to people, show genuine interest in them, follow up over time, and put ourselves in situations where relationships can develop, we will build practices. Not because we've changed who we are, but because we've changed what we do.

That's where Aristotle and I ultimately agree. Action matters. But the nuance for lawyers is that we don't need to become someone else in order to succeed. We don't need to wait for a shift in mindset before we begin. We can start now, exactly as we are, by taking small, deliberate steps that feel just slightly outside our comfort zones.

Over time, those actions compound. We build stronger relationships. We stay top of mind. We create opportunities that wouldn't have existed otherwise. And without ever feeling like we're "selling," we become people who consistently generate work.

So don't stop thinking like a lawyer. But when it comes to marketing, stop acting like one!

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