

PRACTICE POINTERS

So, You **[Still]** Want to Go Solo?

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At one point or another, you've probably considered starting your own law practice. With the freedom to set your own hours, be your own boss, and see your name on the plaque by the door, the decision can seem like a no-brainer—you were born to do this!

Now, it's not that I don't believe in you, but before you order your new business cards and walk out on your current boss, there are some things you need to consider. There are reasons not everyone who goes into law ends up with their own firm. This series will help highlight some of the many aspects of running your own law firm—especially the details—so you can limit the number of times you ask yourself “Why didn't I think of this sooner?!”

Here's what to know before you fly solo ...

OK, But What Do You Do?

When potential clients search the web, they usually have a pretty good idea of what services they need from their attorney. Just searching the internet for “attorney near me” will turn up a horde of attorneys—many of whose practice areas won't be suited to the task. Don't make people guess whether “Ms. Attorney from Legal Law Firm” can handle their problem; market to suit their search strategies. From the time customers see your sign, Google your name, or read your card, they should know if you can help them with their problem. Sure, you could aim to be the Bluth family do-it-all attorney, but the average individual isn't going to hire an attorney until they need one. Get their attention by telling them that you know the field they need to navigate.

Till Death Do You Part ...

How do you know which area of law is right for you? You may experience some anxiety at the prospect of limiting yourself to just a couple emphases. And why not? This decision could determine the course your entire life takes. No pressure, but you probably do want to get it right. Here are some steps to help make your choice.

1. Start by asking yourself why you got into law. What kinds of people did you want to help and what kinds of problems did you want to solve?
2. Consider your strengths. What courses did you excel in? What have others told you that you do well, and which aspects of being an attorney come easiest to you?
3. Study trends in the industry for new and untapped foci where need is great and current options in practitioners are few-to-non-existent. Especially if you're interested in tech development and the legal issues that can arise from previously unthought-of disputes. There are always emergent fields waiting for competent litigators.

4. Don't be afraid to reevaluate. Frequently revisit your marketing metrics and how you feel about your practice. If you're not bringing in the clientele you thought you would, or you're just not feeling it, absolutely fine-tune your approach and try it again. Just because deciding your emphases has the potential to permanently define you, doesn't mean that it has to. As the big name on the wall, you have the power to add or drop practice areas at any time, for any reason. Don't get stuck in a behavior pattern because “that's just how we do it.”

Fine Print and a Couple of Caveats

Your ability to specialize will be heavily dependent not only on what you practice, but where you practice, as well. If your dream is to make others aware of and to combat the underlying biases of artificial intelligence, you may not have as much success trying to practice in a homogenous small town in the rural midwest as you might in a densely populated and diverse metropolitan area. Larger populations will greatly increase your ability to specialize.

But let's say that you prefer to be the jack-of-all-trades. Maybe you like the variety and freedom of doing it all—and the idea of living near a big city repulses you. The highly focused route just might not be your cup of tea. There could be another way.

Rural areas are often short on attorneys. City and county attorney positions can experience high turnover (often going unfilled), and clients must drive long distances to the nearest city for legal services. If you're more Atticus Finch than Ally McBeal, consider hanging your shingle in a centrally located country town where you can handle everything in the surrounding area, from divorces and adoptions to business creation and planning estates. You may not have quite the same earning potential, but you should be able to gather enough contracts and clients to live quite comfortably.

You'll want to practice in a locale that fits your personality and an area of law that provides plenty of business and intellectual stimulation for you. Honor your goals. In a larger city, you should try to find a niche that will set you apart from the many attorneys in the area, but in a rural area specialization won't be as necessary as you'll likely provide a wider variety of services to a smaller number of clients. Ultimately, how much you narrow your practice and what you choose to focus on will be dependent upon your interests and strengths, available clientele, and your willingness to hustle.

Next time: Using your specialization and goals to build a business plan for your firm.

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