

7 Things I've Learned Since Starting a Law Firm

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Written by [The Clio Team](#) , posted August 12, 2015



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In January, I finally did something that I had been wanting to do since graduating law school: I decided to practice law full-time. You don't need me to tell you how the job market is, but suffice it to say that even with a few years of part-time practice and full-time legal writing on my resume, my choices were limited.

So I opened my own shop. I chose to expand my part-time practice to full-time and it has, so far, been terrifying, exciting, and most of all rewarding.

Here are a few lessons and surprises I've experienced along the way:

Down Time Doesn't Exist

This isn't meant to be a [humblebrag](#)

about how hard I work. And I'm not saying that there is no work/life balance or that you'll be trading war stories with those startup CEOs who claim to survive on two hours of sleep per night and love it.

No, what I'm saying is that when you start a practice, you'll probably have no clients. That doesn't mean you twiddle your thumbs or spend hours on Pinterest: you're on *your* time and time really is money when you're living in a billable hours world.

If you don't have a client, work on your website or marketing strategy. Or study the practice guides. Or read the advance sheets from the newest cases. Or evaluate a new tool for your practice that can save you time when things pick up. Get your filing and billing systems butter-smooth now so that when you do have clients, you won't have administrative nightmares.

Every Attorney Has Weaknesses. Bad Attorneys Ignore Theirs.

When I expanded my practice to full-time, I moved from the Bay Area to Southern California. That meant a whole new community of lawyers to meet, work with, and work against. Some have been downright brilliant — the Clarence Darrows of their practice areas. Others have been downright awful. Most fit somewhere in between, with some strengths and some weaknesses.

The most aggravating of the bunch are the ones who have weaknesses and refuse to work on them. Some can't write worth a darn, yet keep launching misspelled tirades through the old fax machine. Some are *not* court people. Some have no people skills at all. And yet, they press forward without even trying to improve or compensate in some other way (such as by hiring an associate that shores up their weaknesses). It's almost as if they are in denial. You can't help but to feel bad for their clients. And you *hate* to work with them as co-counsel, not just because it hurts the client, but also because your reputation and malpractice policy are on the line as well.

Don't be them. Get feedback from co-counsel or friendly fellow barristers. And work on your craft consistently: you not only owe it to yourself and your professional reputation, but you really owe it to your clients.

Prepare for the Snake Oil Salesmen

Lawyers know law. The vast majority don't know business and especially don't know online marketing. Terms like "search engine optimization," "local-mobile," or "[responsively designed website](#)" might as well be "myocardial infarction" or "ulnar collateral ligament rupture." It's all gibberish. This makes them susceptible to the idiots who call and offer a search optimized golden ticket to online marketing success and billable hour riches (for a monthly fee!).

Fortunately for me, much of what I did before going solo full-time was writing about lawyer marketing. I've studied search engine optimization, designed more than a few websites and WordPress blogs, and know enough to tell these cold-callers that they are completely and totally full of crap.

But man, they are relentless. Within days of launching my firm's website and adding local listings to Google, Yelp, and the other directories, I was getting calls from everything from religious-based directories to so-called experts in SEO. A piece of free advice: they're almost all snake oil salesmen. Expect three to four calls per week once your phone number hits the Internet.

The truth is this: online marketing is all about quality content, demonstrating authority, and garnering positive word-of-mouth (expressed in reviews and links to your website). It's a long game that requires a lot of time and effort to build your reputation. Jimmy Phoenix's SEO Wizardry, or whatever the heck scammers call themselves in your neck of the woods, won't have secrets that guarantee success in 30 days or less.

All Marketing is a Long Game

I know a great lawyer. She gets her cases through referrals from past clients. Such a business model takes years to build up. I know another great lawyer. She gets her clients through social contacts and referrals from attorneys met while networking. Again, this takes forever.

And as I mentioned above, your online marketing isn't going to pay dividends overnight.

All marketing is a long game, which really sucks when you're starting a law firm, and you need clients. But unless you have a massive budget that will allow you to blanket your town with billboards, commercials, and direct mailing, there is no quick solution. (Even if you do have such a budget, potential clients are going to look you up online, checking for reviews and your website.)

Be patient. No lawyer wakes up and says, "Man, I really feel like marketing today!" I'd venture a guess that, like me, they'd rather spend their days, afternoons, and occasional evenings and weekends being an actual, practicing lawyer. But this is what solo practice is all about: building a sustainable business while delivering quality legal services to those who can pay the hourly rate.

Contract Work Can Save You

This is more for the folks like me, people with large monthly obligations (student loans, families, mortgages, etc.) that will leave them financially crippled and/or homeless if they don't pay the man every month: you may be able to get by for a few months with zero income, especially if you saved before going solo (you really, *really* need to save before going solo), but at some point, you will need an influx of cash.

Contract work has been my savior. I help other Family Law attorneys with their overload work or research. I do contract writing work as well. And when a few weeks pass with no client revenue, my lights stay on and Uncle Sam stays fed.

Just don't get too lost in the contract world: you don't want to be doing document review full-time in three years, with only one or two satisfied clients to your name.

Be Lean. But Don't be Penny-Wise and Pound-Foolish.

There are so many things to spend money on when you start your firm: furniture, office space, legal research, malpractice insurance, etc. What should you buy now, and what should wait until your business is booming?

Before any big purchase, ask yourself: do I need this? Do I need this to convey a professional appearance to clients (the card-table desk only works in 90s television dramas)? Is this so useful that it will drastically [reduce the amount of time that it takes](#) to deliver services to my clients, thereby saving them money (Clio)? Or does this ensure that I'm providing the highest quality of service (the latest legal research)?

If it doesn't improve the quality or cost of your services, and isn't absolutely necessary to show the client that you are, indeed, an actual lawyer, you probably don't need it. Hold off until you are revenue-positive.

But, of course, there is a caveat: don't be penny-wise and pound-foolish. Just because something costs money, doesn't mean you should go without. I wouldn't want to be a lawyer without malpractice coverage. And a few of the things I have sprung for (cloud-based apps) have proven invaluable already.

The Cloud Will Save You

You've probably used Dropbox by now, or some other cloud storage app. They're pretty great, aren't they?

I've had situations where I needed to look up someone's financial disclosures during a settlement conference: my massive smartphone and cloud drive meant everything was a few taps away (and instantly searchable). I've also had a hiccup recently where a city-wide blackout corrupted my then-updating Windows installation and crashed my main desktop. Both times, the cloud saved me. It makes the days of carrying a USB flash drive seem like the days of carrying a rolling briefcase stuffed with thousands of pages of forms and files.

Old-timers may scoff and say that you don't need stuff like a cloud-based practice management platform or cloud-based file storage. You know what? You can also Shepardize in a book. Technology isn't a luxury in many instances — it's a necessity for delivering quality legal services at a reasonable cost to the client.

The Story as it stands. For Now

The finances are terrifying. The marketing is questionable, at best. The lawyers, even more so. But, if you really love being a lawyer, there's nothing quite as fun or rewarding as digging out the authority that answers a client's "life or death" issue or crushes the wife-beating opposing party's petulant arguments. I think the real key to success as a solo is going to be minimizing the time and effort required for the administrative and business junk, leaving more time to spend helping actual people.

Set up? For more guides and resources on legal marketing, accounting and more for your new firm, check out our [webinars](#), [white papers](#), or [see how Clio can optimize your practice's growth](#) by automating elements of your practice without the extra staff or overheads.

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