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How to Make Some Rain

Observations from the (soaking wet) sidelines.

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‘Rainmaker.’ What is it? *Who* is it? Can we use it in a sentence? Well, as a nod to etymological giant William Safire, the term “rainmaker” came into the common lexicon in the mid-to-late 18th century, just prior to legal marketers’ appropriation of the word, when people in the Western United States actually tried to produce rain. Drought, apparently, gets people thinking big.

How does rainmaking work? Well, there is cloud seeding, whereby an airplane releases substances into the air to manipulate cloud structure and increase precipitation. The U.S. military employed such operations during the Vietnam War to challenge the enemy’s progress, and the method is still in use today. There is also rain dancing, a slightly less scientific, but no less earnest, approach to climate change, commonly associated with Native American dance and prayer rituals.

Then there is our world, where a “rainmaker” is a Midas-like business devel-

oper—the envy of all other partners.

Legal rainmaking, as complex as cloud seeding and as dramatic as ritual prayer, is a world unto itself. We all know the rainmakers. Their feet, clad in fine Italian leather, barely touch the carpet of the hallways through which they walk; they glide really, looking so very confident. Sometimes it’s pure genius that drives their ability to control the climate. In other cases, it’s electricity. Rainmakers are client magnets, they just have a way with people, a certain something you can’t quite name, but it’s akin to social heroin. In rare instances, the rainmaker is brilliant *and* personally electric *and* totes a stunning pedigree. The general thinking, of course, is that the rainmaker is born, not made.

Nope. I’ll have none of it. I’ve been watching rainmakers closely over the last 16 years, finding that 10 common elements set the rainmaker apart from the sopping wet service lawyer. And the rainmaker never forgets these basic—and *earned*—drivers of success. So, whether you are new to the partner ranks or, despite senior status, your hours are shrinking and your points shaved to and fro, let’s surge into 2013 by reviewing the basic tips to legal climate control.



Rainmakers know no boundaries.

If you ask a legal dynamo about her closest friends, you will hear about a diverse mix of personal and professional contacts. Rainmakers do not separate their lives into pockets. Clients are friends, friends are clients. Home is work, work is home. She lives an integrated life, as comfortable scouring the soccer sidelines for prospects as she is talking about a family vacation during a business lunch. Along similar lines, cross-pollinating clients, which is often the most herculean of mar-

keting efforts, is standard operating procedure for the rainmaker. Because the client is a contact she cares about and values beyond the billable hour, she thinks broadly about what that client needs.

Rainmakers are rarely alone. Not only are hordes of people always lurking in and around his office, outside a law firm's walls, the rainmaker spends little time to himself. He lives the credo that you never eat lunch alone. Unless he's hunched over a voluminous pile of documents taking the odd bite of a tuna sandwich, the rainmaker gets breakfast, lunch or an afternoon coffee in the company of others. Sometimes he is out with colleagues, talking about his matters or learning about theirs. Maybe he's getting to know some junior associates to identify the rising stars. Or the obvious dates—clients, prospects, referral sources, experts, former colleagues, media professionals and friends.

Rainmakers care about details. Many years ago, I worked with a lawyer (incidentally, he is now general counsel for a major international bank), who remembered my birthday. It was the oddest thing for a giant in the firm to pop into my office one December morning to wish me a good day. When I asked how he knew it was my birthday, he said I had mentioned it when scheduling a practice group marketing meeting. While that casual mention had been weeks prior, he had a knack for things like that. He recognized that relationships build on details, listening when it counts, remembering what's important to another person. He used his elephantine memory to store terabytes of information. When he spoke to a client, he remembered to ask about the surprise anniversary trip to Puerto Rico. Or whether the client's son had returned to skiing after the knee surgery. Not everyone has a photographic memory, so develop some system to manage client relationships. It's a good idea to keep detailed

notes in Outlook or a rolodex, whatever you use to manage contacts. Jot down anything and everything that will help you to enhance a relationship. Put dates in your calendar to follow up on things...deals, vacations, even a staff member's birthday. But it's more than milestones. If the devil is in the details, so is the divine. For instance, I learned from a mega-rainmaker that not spell-checking a document was a fire-able offense. Sloppiness (ignoring details) translates into carelessness. Details matter on *every* level.

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Rainmakers are interesting and interested. Despite a real lack of scientific evidence, it is well established that rainmakers read. Genre is irrelevant. Some are presidential biography junkies. Some focus on Shakespeare. Others consume Internet data like they are the IBM Roadrunner (which any rainmaker would know is one of the world's fastest super computers). They attend plays and musicals and symphonies and rock concerts. They go to art openings and the ballet. They build elaborate train sets with grandchildren. Not to be confused with idle dilettantes, rainmakers don't have whimsical interests, they have real ones. This makes them balanced and juicy individuals. At the end of the day, the rainmaker knows that a thousand other lawyers are able competitors. It's the richness of his character that tips the scales in one direction or the other.

Rainmakers are high energy people. In every law firm, there are scores of partners who gather in offices or around the coffee machine to whine and complain ad nauseam. Share distribution, annoying spouses, estimated tax payments...the topics change, but the baseline never does. These are people who, while fabulous at the substance of their work, zap every bit of positive energy in their midst. No matter how technically skilled these negative nellys are, they will never broker real power. Without exception, rainmakers have seemingly endless energy. They move a lot. When you work with a rainmaker, you don't realize it's midnight. We've been led to think that energy comes from glucose. It doesn't. It comes from love. Rainmakers do what they do because they couldn't imagine doing anything else. They plow through days because they love their work from their core and to its core. Are there bad days and logjams? Of course. Flu season happens. But the rainmaker is the bounce-back champion because the rainmaker loves the game.

Rainmakers are social capitalists. Along similar lines, rainmakers take ownership for everything. They are control freaks. This is sometimes confused with client hoarding—some nefarious desire to maintain origination or billable credit. Not the case. Rainmakers control things when others fail to, or care less about, stepping up to the plate. Rainmakers control things because they care and because they can. While hard to swallow in firm dynamics, this truth is key to most firms' survival because a law firm is a community of owners. A rainmaker will not complain about status quo, she will change status quo. In taking this responsibility, she will also carry the burden of failure. A rainmaker is not afraid to fail; to the contrary, she fears stasis. (See Energy above.) The entitled feel they are not getting what they deserve or robbed of opportunities. Not so for gurus of client devel-

opment. Rainmakers are not passive actors and their vision is steady and forward-looking. They focus on what they earn (what is in their control), rather than harping on what they deserve (which is someone else's issue).

Rainmakers are credible. I recently found myself at a really uncomfortable meeting. Corporate partner X asked litigation partner Y (the "rainmaker") for an introduction to a prominent private equity fund client. The rainmaker artfully dodged the question. Corporate partner X kept at it. The rainmaker continued to punt. Finally, corporate partner X raised his voice to a fevered pitch and laid it on the line: "Is there some reason you are refusing to set me up with this client?" In another article, we can tackle how to ask rainmakers for help. For the time being, suffice it to say that as social capitalists who take an ownership interest in every single relationship, rainmakers do not cross-market clients unless they believe the marriage makes sense. Highly attuned to details, they give serious thought to whether personalities gel. Further, although it's not something anyone wants to say aloud, there are occasions where a particular practice or attorney is not as sharp as it can or should be. Forget about an introduction in such cases. The rainmaker will only market on behalf of spectacular lawyers who will credibly add value to the client.

Rainmakers make marriages. When it makes sense and adds value, rainmakers are tireless matchmakers. Because their spirit is hugely entrepreneurial, these combinations often have nothing to do with their own personal retention but instead reflect a desire to put good people together wherever and whenever possible. This desire results in the rainmaker living in a matrix of his own choosing where this REIT meets that developer or this neighbor/investor meets that hedge fund guy. The rainmaker is careful not

to bring it too close to home; however, when one is so accustomed to operating in an integrated environment, it is entirely natural for the rainmaker to make connections and disappear altogether.

Rainmakers and their shoes. Taking attention to detail to a deeply personal level, image matters to successful people. Rainmakers are intently focused on their appearance. They engage in substantive public relations, that is, credible activities and accolades that strengthen their appearance to the outside world. Forever careful and serious, a rainmaker doesn't peddle for media glitz or random awards that pop up overnight and have no real value. Their focus is credible, remember. The attention is equally robust on their physical appearance. This isn't about being glamorous or trendy or a slave to the brand du jour. It means being tidy and put together. Shoes gleam. Nail polish is perfect or it is absent. Ties are pressed, collars stayed. There is no such thing as static cling. Ski jackets over a suit? Never. Change from walking shoes to pumps in a clients' reception area? It happens all the time. But never to rainmakers. In sum, dress for the company you'd most like to keep.

Rainmakers master the ask. I regularly sit with partners who throw up their hands and ask what they are doing wrong. They are great lawyers. They have great contacts. But the quiet pipeline has relegated these partners to servicing the matters of others. They feel defeated, second-rate and really confused. Why isn't it enough to be nice and talented? The fact is, the issue most often pivots not on what the partner is doing wrong, rather what the partner is not doing. 99 percent of the time, it comes down to something so simple it's almost pedestrian: You've got to ask for business. You must tell people how they can help you. If you are genuinely nice, they probably want to. You must believe so strongly in the quality of your

offering that you feel a prospect would be genuinely well served by retaining you. Prospects will decline the offer. Or the opportunity will pass. Ask again. Chances are, if you're wondering why a law school friend retained a competitor and not you, it's probably because the competitor didn't disappear. The competitor maintained the relationship. And when the time was right, the competitor asked. Worst case scenario, most grown-ups in New York City will be honest. If there's no chance they'd hire you, they'll say so. Until you hear that kind of no, you are still in the game for a yes.

As in all things, certainly there are exceptions. Expertise will always be the first test in hiring a lawyer. Sometimes expertise is enough. To be sure, everyone knows a senior practitioner who is such a recognized authority in a particular area that he or she gets hired despite an utter lack of personality. But those are the outliers. Most attorneys live inside the margins, where, in this ultra-competitive legal marketplace, we should assume that excellence is a bare minimum. So, as you embark on the next year, take a good look up, down, around and then look ahead: If you want your practice to thrive, the rain is there for the making.