



Timothy B. Corcoran

## My Cool Kids Are Better Than Your Cool Kids

By Timothy B. Corcoran

**A**uthor and NPR commentator David Sedaris discussing his realization that the popular kids in his school were not universally popular:

*“Call me naive, but it had simply never occurred to me that other schools might have their own celebrity circles. At the age of twelve, I thought the group at E.C. Brooks was, if not nationally known, then at least its own private phenomenon. Why else would our lives revolve around it so completely? ... But what if I was wrong? What if I’d wasted my entire life comparing myself to people who didn’t really matter? Try as I might, I still can’t wrap my mind around it.” (When You Are Engulfed in Flames, by David Sedaris, Little, Brown & Company, Copyright 2008.)*

A law firm managing partner recently asked me to meet with a senior partner to calm him down after an outburst over what he considered poor marketing practices. Apparently the partner was very prominent. Everyone knows him. Presumably his presence is one of the factors laterals and incoming associates consider when choosing whether to come on board. He’s one of the top rainmakers. He’s well known to both political parties and has been considered for high office several times.

Or so I was told by the marketer as we prepared for the meeting. I had never heard of him. I’m fairly knowledgeable about the legal marketplace, and his name meant nothing to me. Nothing at all.

The senior partner was as articulate and bright as I had been led to believe. He had a sincere desire to expand his practice. He believed that if the firm overall and the marketing minions in particular would simply act as he directed, his practice would thrive. The practice was doing well by any measure, except that in his view inferior firms with inferior talent were winning engagements that

should have come to him. Not only was the senior partner more accomplished than the competition (and arguably he was as good as he claimed to be), but the various general counsel who had been hiring the competition were often his personal friends.

We quickly learned that the senior partner did not regularly reach out to his personal network of professional acquaintances. Many of his friends didn’t explicitly know about his practice. Much of his practice consisted of referrals from past clients, and they appeared to be pleased with his work product. But he didn’t land many of the noteworthy clients in the news who needed exactly what he offered.

To me, the challenge was simple. We needed to raise his profile. I was strongly encouraged not to express this opinion, because it would set the senior partner off. Furthermore, it was wrong. Everyone knows who he is!

In troubled times like these, we really need to question our own rhetoric. It’s perfectly fine for a senior partner at a large law firm to believe he’s well known and popular, so long as he understands the practical reality that his popularity often extends only to the boundaries of his own “school.” There are plenty of other schools and they have their own cool kids.

Practicing law requires the application of logic. Senior partners like this one believe that (a) clients need well-credentialed counselors; (b) I am a well-credentialed counselor; so therefore, (c) clients will hire me. Makes sense. In recent times when demand was high, the phone rang, thus proving the theory. Trouble is, it’s flawed logic.

We could apply this logic to another scenario. Analysts note that the number of drowning deaths at the New Jersey shore rises dramatically on days when vendors sell the most ice cream. The obvious solution is to limit the sale of ice cream. Eliminate the cause, eliminate the effect. However, clever readers will note that drownings and high volume ice

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cream sales both occur on days when the temperature is highest, which also corresponds to high numbers of beach visitors. More visitors, more drownings. As it turns out, ice cream doesn't cause drownings!

My advice to the senior partner: work the phones. Reach out to your network. Author a blog. Write an article. Give a webinar. Deliver a speech to a trade association. Take specific, tactical action to inform your network about the work you do. Don't assume that your prominence and popularity will automatically lead to new business.

Winning business isn't a high school popularity contest. Even if it were, it's safe to assume no one's ever heard of your high school. So go make some new friends. ♦

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