

What to Do When Clients Don't Need Your Services Right Now but May Need Them Later

By [LawVision](#) on April 7, 2020

I have a refrigerator. It's a General Electric...or maybe it's an LG. I'm not really sure. I like it ok, but I don't think about it. I don't dream about the next model or the newest upgrade. My fridge works fine, and that's all I care about. At some point, it might break down, and I'll look around and get something else. The same goes for my dryer, dishwasher, and car insurance. I don't worry about getting the next best model. I don't think I am alone. Many of us just keep moving in our lives until something breaks down. When my dryer stops spinning and the repairman schedules an appliance funeral, I start shopping, but not a second sooner.

In that one fleeting moment when I realize unless I act, I will soon have lots of wet clothes or a sink full of dirty dishes, I suddenly shift from a non-buyer to a buyer. I instantly fall into the target market for a large home appliance. But it's hard for the manufacturers of those products to find me at that very moment. I don't immediately go on a list of potential buyers. Tech-savvy marketers can't push a button that deploys salespeople to my door.

So, how do they find me in my time of need? I'm a buyer, after all, and their job is to find me. They have to start marketing to me long before that key moment. Way before my sudden transition from "I never think about my refrigerator" to "my food is rotting and I need a fridge" the best marketers have been selling to me all along. They have been spending money to find me before I need them. In fact, companies try to find us all the time. Take car insurance companies. They buy advertising time on television with memorable footage of talking geckos and sophisticated cavemen. They place their company logos behind the goalposts of every college football stadium. They show ads over and over again until you recognize the characters as soon as the advertisements hit your screen. They have NFL football quarterbacks and famous country singers get their company jingles stuck in your mind.

Why the repeated and expensive advertising? These companies know their targets are members of what I call the "sleeping market"—the sleeping market is a group of people who don't need your products and services now and don't really think much about your services regularly but will discover an instantaneous need after a precipitating event. If they know your company at that moment, you are on a very short road to having them as a new customer. We are all members of a sleeping market for one product or another.

Of course, law firms have a sleeping market as well. A small company suddenly finds itself sued by a competitor, a spouse walks out the door, or an employee leaves with company secrets and a long list of faithful clients. In an instant, these prospective clients need you. If you aren't already on their shortlist, you are way behind the people who are.

How do you approach your sleeping market, short of ads with geckos and quarterbacks singing jingles? The answer is: with good old-fashioned top-of-mind relationship building. It's hard work, but if you are a litigator with very little ongoing institutional work, it could be essential. Here are some ideas to help you prepare for the moment a member of your sleeping market wakes up.

Be in Touch

I once interviewed a General Counsel who told me about a firm that provided him a quarterly seminar on new regulations

in his industry. He was not planning to leave his current firm, but when I asked where he would turn if the current firm dissolved, made a big mistake, or had a conflict, he immediately pointed to the firm that kept him up to date. Regular positive contact that brings value to the table helps people in your sleeping market remember you when they wake. There are hundreds of ways to stay in touch by providing value, such as finding someone a job, making a key introduction, or writing a letter of recommendation for a prospect's daughter. Done effectively, staying in touch prepares your sleeping market to wake up, see your face first, and settle into trust immediately, like a newly hatched chick looking at a little boy.

Know Others They Might Reach Out to after a Precipitating Event

You almost always share your sleeping market with other professional services providers. A dishwasher buyer needs someone to install that dishwasher just like your sell-side M&A target needs a business broker. Building relationships with other professional service providers broadens your sleeping market and brings you more chances to be front and center when the sleeper awakes.

Be a Known Expert in Your Field

When a sudden need to make a large purchase arrives, often it's not so much about a relationship as it is about a reputation. "You need a complex lease drafted? You should call Janet—everyone uses her. She's the best." Building your reputation before your target realizes they need someone like you always helps.

Be Where They Look

If you've ever foolishly decided to install a sink or repair a hot water heater yourself, you may have done a few internet searches to find a how-to video. You can find a video with instructions on how to fix or install just about anything. Many are made by overconfident do-it-yourselfers with iPhones and patient spouses. But product manufacturers and large retailers like Home Depot and Lowe's also post their own videos. Their hope, of course, is that you will rely on them as credible sources of knowledge, motivating you to enter the store, ask their experts more questions, and buy more materials. They've learned how to bring up their names at the exact moment you need their help: when you are looking for it on the internet.

Lawyers can do the same. CLEs, seminars, and "lunch & learns" all build trust and reputation long before a specific need arises and are even better if the audience attends because an immediate need exists.

Create the Need Yourself

Manufacturers can't program in a date for a product to fail (although I continue to believe that smartphone manufacturers have been doing this for years). But they can point out safety issues, highlight energy cost savings, and recommend new products where appropriate. Convincing a consumer that they would be better off buying a new machine than repairing the current one will sell more products. If done honestly, it also serves the best interest of the consumer. Understanding the business challenges of your prospective clients achieves the same goal. Identifying land mines and offering solutions for avoiding them awakens members of your sleeping market, creates an immediate need, and, if done right, serves prospects in ways your competitors aren't.

Start Now

Selling to the sleeping market takes time. YOU must be the one they think of calling when a sudden need arises. In most cases, billboards, jingles, and talking geckos will be ineffective. For professional services, a trusting relationship and awareness of your services need to be in place when the precipitating event occurs. The only way to do that is to get started now. Take your best-educated guess about who may need your services in the future and start building a relationship worthy of a call when someone in your sleeping market wakes up.

