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Rainmaker Q&A: Kilpatrick Townsend's Tina Williams McKeon

Law360, New York (August 15, 2016, 4:15 PM ET) --

Tina Williams McKeon

Tina Williams McKeon, a partner at Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP in Atlanta, is a patent attorney who blends her scientific background with quality client service in patent acquisition, IP strategy and portfolio management in life sciences and biotechnology. She learns her clients' commercial needs and tailors her approach for each unique set of circumstances. Her clients rely on her for challenging matters, knowing that she will spot issues and provide practical solutions and advice.

McKeon surrounds herself with talented partners, associates and patent agents and works with a variety of clients, including leading universities, research institutions, investors and corporations. She also teaches law students and graduate students, is a founding member and active participant in the Atlanta IP Inn of Court, served as chair of the IP section of the Georgia Bar, and is a current board member of Southeast BIO. She is a recipient of the 2013 Georgia Bio Community Award, where she was recognized for "being that rare combination of scientific expertise, legal acumen and sociability."

Q: What skill was most important for you in becoming a rainmaker?

A: Showing up and engaging — reliably and relentlessly. Often I would have preferred to have stayed in the office or gone straight home, foregoing a lunch meeting or networking opportunity. Often I felt like an outsider breaking into conversations between what appeared to me to be real insiders. However, the more involved I became in various organizations or with various people, the easier it became to engage.

When I initially engaged in legal or trade organizations, I often took on responsibilities that required more work but that gave me more exposure to others. For example, I worked on the newsletter for the IP Section of the Georgia Bar, and I worked on the sponsorship committee for Southeast BIO. Although these are not the plum positions in any organization, these positions required that I reach out to others, introduce myself, ask for their help, and follow-up as needed. All of this gave me practice in skills needed for client development and broadened my contacts.

Q: How do you prepare a pitch for a potential new client?

A: I start where everyone starts, with an internet search. I learn as much as I can about the potential client, the individuals attending the pitch, and their patent portfolio. I look at file histories of their pending patent applications in order to identify their points of pain, and I identify their current legal counsel and consider how to distinguish Kilpatrick Townsend and what we offer.

Only then do I put together the proposed team and any pitch materials. I select the proposed team carefully, without loading the pitch materials with bios for lawyers this client might never see again. Finally, even with all this effort, I recognize I undoubtedly missed something. I thus remind myself to listen more than I talk in a face-to-face meeting or conference call with the potential client, and I keep a short list of open-ended questions handy to stimulate their conversation.

Q: Share an example of a time when landing a client was especially difficult, and how you handled it.

A: I was invited to pitch for work from a potential client that I knew was also meeting with a number of our competitors. The general counsel suggested that I would improve our chances of landing the work if I invited a male colleague to connect better with the company CEO. I was a bit surprised by the request, but I nonetheless arranged for one of my male partners to prepare the pitch materials and take the lead.

However, when his early morning flight was canceled he was unable to participate in the pitch. I was caught completely flat-footed, with a slide deck I had not seen. I found the entire experience very uncomfortable. When I returned to my office, I called the GC and withdrew from consideration. I realized this client may not have been the best match for me or our firm. More importantly, I realized that pitching for work is a lot like dating. You must accept that you will not be well-matched with everyone. Let those go by and find the good matches.

Q: What should aspiring rainmakers focus on when beginning their law careers?

A: First, rainmaking always begins with relationships. Get to know people and get involved with them, even if you do not consider them important to your career at the moment. I took the time to have lunch with a young law student several times, and, when he eventually took an in-house position with a Fortune 50 company, he sent me some very interesting work. I also offered to help an overworked and overwhelmed partner once who later went in-house. The company where she worked is still one of my most interesting clients. These specific opportunities cannot always be anticipated, but what's important is to be open, reliable and engaged with people. They will remember your willingness to engage with them as much as they will remember that you blew them off when they really needed your help.

Second, accept that as a law-firm lawyer you are a salesperson, as well as a service provider. There is no shame in selling a service to someone who needs it. In fact, you should seek to sell the legal services that make the client more successful and you should be honest, with yourself and with the client, as to what is needed.

Q: What's the most challenging aspect of remaining a rainmaker?

A: The biggest challenge to remaining a rainmaker is that you may get comfortable, busy or lazy. When this happens, you may forget to provide your very best service to long-term clients or you may fail to recognize a client's internal turmoil. You may forget that you will lose clients even when you provide your best service, perhaps through client merger or because of a new investor who insists on counsel of their choice.

Additionally, you may be busy with tons of work or busy bringing on a new client, which can take a lot of time and energy as you work to perfect the relationship and representation. For all these reasons, you may decide to pause your networking and client development activities. This is a mistake. You must take a long-term view and realize your relationships with both current clients and potential clients require attention to thrive and to survive. Accordingly, you cannot become too comfortable, too busy or too lazy to stay engaged with clients and potential clients.

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