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Leading Law Firm Rainmakers

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(Left to right, seated) Gary A. Hernandez, Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP, and Deryck A. Palmer, Cadwalader, Wickersham, & Taft LLP; (standing, left to right) Stephen A. Riddick, Greenberg Traurig LLP, Joan M. Haratani, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, and Wilson Chu, Haynes and Boone LLP.

Jay Kelly Photography

Leading Law Firm Rainmakers

The Lovedu tribe of South Africa believes that rain is the material source of all happiness and spiritual well-being. Because its queen possesses the ability to make rain, she holds more power than any other member of their society. Similarly, rainmakers in the legal profession are seen as indispensable to a firm's survival.

Substantive legal skills are no longer enough—today, being a successful partner requires demonstrated success in business development. Majority and minority rainmakers alike agree that, to bring in a lot of work and make lots of money for their firm, lawyers need to be not only expert practitioners, but also must know how to build relationships and market themselves.

Traditionally a small number of white male partners have brought in the big clients at most firms; today, however, minority and women attorneys are now achieving rainmaker status by securing business through customary channels as well as newly created networks of their own.

In the following pages, a selection of savvy partners of color share some thoughts on how they “make it rain,” and reflect on how their careers developed.

Joseph B. Alexander Jr.

Partner

Hunton & Williams LLP

Years Practicing: 14

Area of Practice: Private Equity



When he was fresh out of Duke University School of Law, Joseph B. Alexander Jr. was advised by his first supervising partner and mentor to focus on business development with the junior people at his level in her clients' offices. While she worked with the senior executives (typically the general counsel, CFO, or CEO), Alexander engaged with the junior lawyers or business people, hoping that one day they would be in a position to hire counsel and Alexander would be in a position to take on the work. His mentor's advice was solid, and today, Alexander is a rainmaker at Hunton & Williams' Atlanta office.

"Early on, I learned that business development is a full-time job," says the co-head of H & W's firm-wide private equity group. "The substantive part is very important, but building and maintaining relationships is a bigger part of what I do now." Alexander contends that African American attorneys traditionally have been at a disadvantage because they generally have fewer preexisting relationships with decision makers; nevertheless, he concedes that most attorneys regardless of race or gender face similar challenges in putting together a book of business. The trick for a new lawyer, he says, is to focus on generating new relationships as early as possible, while also focusing on substantive work "because if you're not a good lawyer you'll lose any new clients that you do get."

Happily for Alexander, what he does to develop business is what he likes to do ordinarily: participate in civic and fraternal groups, play golf, socialize. A former computer geek who decided against a career in that field because the work was too solitary, Alexander now counts almost all of his clients as friends.

Wilson Chu

Partner

Haynes and Boone LLP

Years Practicing: 23

Area of Practice: Corporate, Mergers & Acquisitions



Wilson Chu is a corporate partner at Haynes and Boone's Dallas office, where he previously served as head of the firm's Mergers & Acquisitions Practice Group. He describes himself as a "cup is half full kind of guy." He explains, "You can walk into a room and think that being a minority makes you the odd man out, or you can believe that you're unique and there's a room full of opportunity simply because you're not like everyone else." Chu ascribes his can-do attitude to years of competitive tennis (having lettered in college), and more important, to his mother, a widowed immigrant from Hong Kong who single-handedly raised six children—all of whom grew up to be very successful professionals.

"Because minority attorneys haven't historically had access to the networks available to mainstream lawyers, we've had to either break into those or develop our own," says Chu. As the sole Asian American member of the exclusive Salesmanship Club of Dallas (a men's service organization comprised of the city's business elite) and founding chair of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association's Partners Committee, Chu has done both.

And while Chu believes that there is no substitute for substantive excellence, he also advocates that attorneys of color leverage the power and opportunities of being a minority—use the institutions already in place (like the MCCA and other diversity-driven organizations) that give minorities an advantage. In 2006, Chu (along with Don Liu, General Counsel of Xerox Corporation) launched a "NAPABA 10x10 Initiative" to increase the number of Asian Pacific American General Counsel in the Fortune 500 from five to ten by 2010. In 2007, the count already stands at 11. Time to declare victory and go home? "No," says Chu, "that means the glass is still just half-full."

Joan M. Haratani

Partner

Morgan, Lewis & Bockius

Years Practicing: 23

Area of Practice: Litigation



For Joan M. Haratani, a litigation partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius' San Francisco office, rainmaking is all about attitude.

"Any challenge or journey begins with confronting your own assumptions or fears," says Haratani. "If you go into something feeling negative, you're guaranteed to fail; it's essential to remove those internal roadblocks keeping you from developing a big book of business." Among hiring partners, she continues, a perception exists that minorities cannot connect with the average white male general counsel because of race, but she believes that assumption is flat-out wrong, and minority partners need to know that, too. "To 'make rain,' it's imperative to believe in yourself, your firm, and your team, and you also need to believe that general counsel and other in-house counsel who do the hiring are all smart, fair people who can identify talent."

The daughter of Japanese American immigrants who were held in internment camps during World War II, and herself the subject of racist taunts growing up, Haratani has known discrimination, but the University of California, Davis School of Law graduate and 2006 president of the Bar Association of San Francisco has refused to become discouraged, choosing instead to oppose injustice and to create success.

A strong advocate of karma and positive thinking, Haratani believes in bringing her best possible self to the firm. "Training for your first marathon can be terrifying or a great adventure," she says. "Similarly with rainmaking, it's how you internalize your goals. It can be either a huge burden or a lot of fun. I choose to make it the latter."

To be a rainmaker requires a solid skill set ("Without basic skills you're like a carpenter who can't hammer a nail"), but equally important, says Haratani, is believing in something greater than yourself and your fears.

Gary A. Hernandez

Partner

Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP

Years Practicing: 22

Area of Practice: Insurance



Twelve years ago, Gary A. Hernandez left the California Department of Insurance in San Francisco, where he served as deputy commissioner, to enter private practice as a partner. "Although I was able to forego the typical difficult route to making partner at a firm, I encountered other obstacles," Hernandez explains. "I came to private practice with zip. The only thing I could do was to tell the world about the expertise I had gained in government." And Hernandez did just that.

A native of Merced, Calif., and former Democratic fundraiser in his home state, Hernandez was never shy about making his talents known. He suggests the same for up-and-coming attorneys. "They need to blow their own horn," he says. "By speaking monthly, publishing several articles a year, and writing a book, I was able to build my credibility and attract some clients and grow the relationships. And never be afraid to ask for work, to ask if there are any projects to get involved in. Do what it takes to get your foot in the door."

According to Hernandez, his early experience as a fundraiser was fantastic training for his current work. "It allowed me to be in a room with power brokers who had the unified interest in helping a candidate achieve a goal. For the first time I was exposed to the world of business and politics and learned what it would take to be a part of all that."

Hernandez started up Sonnenschein's regulatory insurance group ten years ago as its only lawyer. Today, he heads up 20 lawyers and hopes to have 20 more within the next five years. And although Hernandez eschews the term "rainmaker" because it might be potentially offensive to American Indians, he is acutely aware of the importance of bringing in business. "Gone are the days of tenure," he sighs. "To stay an equity partner, it isn't enough to be just a good lawyer."

Deryck A. Palmer

Partner

Cadwalader, Wickersham, & Taft LLP

Years Practicing: 26+

Area of Practice: Financial Restructuring



"Perseverance, perseverance, perseverance"—according to Deryck A. Palmer, it's the key to success. A partner in one of the nation's premier financial restructuring practices at Cadwalader's New York office, Palmer says, "You must embrace hard work. Success requires hard work, it requires consistently representing your clients with a combination of solid legal counsel and sound business judgment, it requires understanding their problems, making those problems your own, and providing them with solutions."

Prior to joining Cadwalader, Palmer spent more than 26 years at Weil, Gotshal & Manges in the Business Finance & Restructuring Department, many of which were spent as a significant rainmaking partner. Palmer's ability to generate significant business depended upon a combination of his efforts: mastering an area of law; managing client and colleague relationships; training and developing lawyers; and contributing to marketing, recruiting, and pro bono initiatives. Along the way, Palmer recognized that there are particular challenges for minorities regarding business development: "Historically, we haven't been seen in the role of rainmaker. It's up to us, minority attorneys, to change that mindset by proving it wrong. The best way to prove it wrong is to demonstrate competence in all of the core areas of your practice, expertise in your client's business, and a clear and definable vision for the development of your practice."

Over the next five years, the University of Michigan School of Law graduate plans to double the size of his practice at Cadwalader. He encourages others to think big too. "Once you've developed a mastery of your art, there is no limit to what you can do," he says. "So long as you seek out opportunities, work hard, believe in your vision, learn from your missteps, and move forward with resolve and determination, you will be successful."

W. Ray Persons

Partner

King & Spalding LLP

Years Practicing: 30

Area of Practice: Litigation



Early in his career, Ray Persons adopted the position that if he became the best trial lawyer around, then business would inevitably come to him. Unfortunately, when he entered the profession 30 years ago, there were very few minority partners in majority firms, and big companies were not giving business to minority firms. "I had to chart new ground," says Persons, now a litigation partner at King & Spalding's Atlanta office. "There was no one who looked like me to help me with what I was doing."

Things began to change for Persons in 1988 with the American Bar Association's Minority Counsel Demonstration program. Crafted largely by former Detroit mayor and former ABA president Dennis W. Archer, the program helped to forge relationships between minority firms and attorneys and corporate clients. "First insurance companies began to hire us to handle cases, followed by Atlanta's school board, a Fortune 500 waste management company and several utilities companies," says Persons. "The demographics had shifted on juries, among judges, and in some cases in board rooms, so minority litigators began to get more work. I took it as an opportunity to really show what I could do and to build a trial résumé."

Today, at the top of his game and taking on increasingly complex cases, Persons advises young minority attorneys not to look exclusively toward large firms or be guided solely by compensation—that will come. Instead, he suggests that they go where there are people willing to invest in their training and offer real opportunities to build a book of business.

Stephen A. Riddick

Partner

Greenberg Traurig LLP

Years Practicing: 19

Area of Practice: Corporate



As a young associate, Stephen A. Riddick felt his then-firm did not expect much from him. "I was floundering," he says. "Not incidentally, during that period I was without a mentor." That was soon to change.

Riddick, now a corporate finance and mergers and acquisitions partner in Greenberg Traurig LLP's Washington, DC, and Tysons Corner, Va., offices, credits two mentors at the firm with jump-starting his career. One, a Caucasian corporate partner with whom he worked, trained Riddick and gave him the chance to prove himself as a member of his team while helping him chart a path toward partnership and success. The other, a trailblazing African American judge turned litigation partner, imparted tremendous lessons on life inside and outside the office. Riddick believes strongly in mentorship as a key component in law firm business development, and urges minority attorneys who find good mentors to take them, "without regard to race [or] gender."

Riddick encourages many young attorneys, especially those involved in a regulated industry (environmental law, antitrust, etc.), to consider a stint in government service in their chosen field after spending a few years in private practice. "Later, when they're back in private practice," he says, "They'll have a leg up on other firm attorneys—greater insight into their practice area, and former government colleagues who may land positions within corporations and be in a position to give them work."

Nagendra (Nick) Setty

Managing Principal

Fish & Richardson LLP

Years Practicing: 15

Area of Practice: Patent, Trademark, and Intellectual Property Litigation



In addition to running Fish & Richardson's Atlanta office, managing principal Nick Setty maintains a national practice that emphasizes all aspects of intellectual property litigation and counseling. Much of his time is devoted to business development—a lot of legal matters for a doctor's son who was supposed to follow in his father's footsteps. "I struck a deal with my father: Before pursuing my desire to become a trial lawyer, I'd at least give med school a try." After a year of studying medicine (and another spent ski-bumming in Vail, Colo.), Setty went on to graduate from Emory University School of Law in 1992.

As one of two or three South Asian students in his law school class, Setty had few chances to connect with fellow students with whom he shared a common ethnic and cultural background. Consequently, he worked that much harder to integrate throughout his early career. Today, the number of South Asians in law schools and firms has increased, and organizations like the National Association of South Asian Bar Associations (NASABA) have active mentoring programs and panels dedicated to business development.

"I've been active with the ABA for a long time, and for me it's mostly about service. With NASABA it's different—for the first time in my life I can attribute getting work to my belonging to an organization," says Setty. "Without being exclusive, there really is something to be said about sharing opportunities with people of common backgrounds. I do it, and I urge all young minority lawyers to do the same."

Pauline A. Schneider

Partner

Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP

Years Practicing: 22

Area of Practice: Public Finance



Build a résumé, but don't neglect to build confidence too. So advises attorney Pauline A. Schneider to up-and-coming lawyers everywhere: "It's important that both prospective clients and you believe that you are the right person to find the solution to whatever their legal issues are," she says. "That's what's going to get you hired."

Schneider, a public finance partner in Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP's Washington, DC office, has built a strong book of business since leaving DC government to enter private practice in 1985. "I'm not entirely comfortable with the term 'rainmaker'—it's a moniker that I'd rather leave to others to define," says Schneider. "I will say the ability to bring in work means a lot to firms. From that perspective, I've done pretty well."

Rainmaking is not for everyone: Some attorneys have a very difficult time selling themselves, making "the ask," or articulating "why you need me and not the lawyer across the hall," explains Schneider, a Yale Law School graduate. However, laying a strong foundation of basic business development sometimes helps to diminish those insecurities. "Hone substantive legal as well as interpersonal skills and then get attuned to the many business opportunities around you," she recommends. "Seize chances to show your skills, and be sensitive to those around you. In my practice area I forge relationships with the people in government who hand out business long before asking them for contracts. That way they know me and have a notion of my skills and experience. It makes a big difference."

Victor Vital

Partner

Baker Botts LLP

Years Practicing: 12

Area of Practice: Litigation



"Not all litigators can try a case to a conclusion before a jury, but a trial lawyer can try any matter to a conclusion before a jury. A client headed for trial should always be in the hands of a trial lawyer rather than a litigator." So says self-described trial attorney Victor Vital, whose love of debate, contention, and dispute ultimately inspired him to enter the legal profession.

After graduating second in his class from Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School of Law, Vital went straight to work at the district attorney's office in Harris County (Houston, Texas). Vital was singularly focused—he wanted to try cases, and he knew that that would not be the case for a young associate at a large firm. In retrospect, Vital would take that same path again: "It made me the lawyer I am today," he says. "I tried a case my first day on the job, and within 30 minutes realized that if your presentation skills, demeanor, and presence are good, you have the power to change the entire dynamic of the courtroom."

Now a litigation partner at Baker Botts' Dallas office, Vital focuses primarily on representing clients in white-collar criminal defense matters, complex commercial matters, unfair competition matters, and other business disputes. Exceedingly optimistic, Vital sees only opportunities, never challenges. He recommends that young minority attorneys who are seeking to build a big book of business master their practice areas ("None of this works if you're peddling a bad product"); create a buzz about themselves by publishing, speaking, and presenting; and never overlook anyone. "The associates and junior business people of today are the gatekeepers of tomorrow."