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Attorney Spotlight

Daniel Siegel talks about not focusing on a single practice area

Daniel Siegel found out, as many attorneys do, that your career path is more a result of circumstances than aspirations. In his own words, here he offers fellow lawyers some practical advice on staying agile in an ever-changing legal environment.



Lawyers are creatures of habit. Lawyers are also pigeonholed into a “specialty” or practice area. For example, once a lawyer becomes known for her expertise in workers’ compensation law, she often decides that this is the only area where she will practice and makes no effort to learn other practice areas, *just in case*.

But there are negatives to becoming known as a one-trick pony attorney, particularly as the practice of law evolves and lawyers discover that they need to learn to ride something else. Oddly, as much as I am a creature of habit, I have never been a one-trick pony, and am thankful for that. Here’s the story of my journey.

Like most lawyers, when I was in law school, and after passing the bar, I had a vision for my career. My dream was to be a reporter for *The New York Times*® covering the U.S. Supreme Court. After all, I loved to write and had been a journalist in college, so *The New York Times* was a logical stepping stone. That dream never came true. Instead, I found myself working in a small personal injury firm and wasn’t happy doing the daily grunt work common to high-volume practices like that. Plus, the firm did not have the type of atmosphere that cultivated my interests, so I moved on to a firm that handled a wider range of personal injury cases, but also gave me the opportunity to handle workers’ compensation cases as well as their periodic appeals. In addition, the atmosphere was more welcoming and I fit in from the start.

By that time, just two years into my career, the dream of working for *The New York Times* had faded. Instead, I focused on learning the various skills needed to excel in the areas of practice I found myself handling. After all, like most young attorneys, despite all the dreams, the direction of my career was far more a result of circumstances than aspirations.

But I was also fortunate, because I was handling workers’ compensation cases, third-party cases and all of the firm’s civil appeals. And we had more than our share, so I had many opportunities to put my writing skills to work. As a result, I became well versed in appellate law and procedure, and was fortunate to win quite a few high-profile, precedential appeals.

I also took my boss's advice and got involved in bar associations and joined a few committees outside my practice area. Among those were local and state ethics committees, where I met numerous lawyers who never would have otherwise crossed my path. They became friends, mentors and sources of business, which means sources of referral fees. Plus, exposure to the ethics committees led to other bar positions.

After nearly 15 years with this firm, my reputation for handling a wide range of cases grew. There were some attorneys who knew me as the "appellate guy," others who knew me as the "workers' comp maven," while others knew me as "Ed's second chair on larger personal injury cases." Plus, there were no pigeon holes, because if one area did go dry, there were others that naturally flowed.

Call it what you will, but despite all these areas of practice, by 2000 I needed change and decided to leave the firm (where I had risen to partner) and try a different practice area. This time my focus was on mass torts and class actions. Fortunately, through my bar association contacts, I met a lawyer whose firm was hiring, and he told his partners that "if Dan is looking, hire him," which they did.

Suddenly I was handling class actions, mass torts and, of course, much of the firm's appellate practice. Because of my civil litigation background, I knew how to litigate, and quickly learned the substantive law underlying the cases. In short order I became a partner known for my litigation, writing and tech skills, the latter having developed at my prior firm and becoming more substantial at the new office. As with my first job, I recognized that it was time to leave after a few years, not because of the people (most were wonderful), but because it was time to be my own boss and run my own firm.

Fast forward to October 2005, when I hung out my shingle, opening a solo law firm as well as a technology consulting firm primarily focused on the legal market, with an office less than one mile from home—far preferable to the 9.5-mile, one-hour commute I endured for roughly 20 years.

My thought was to operate a traditional personal injury/workers' compensation firm. But I didn't count on two things. First, the economy tanked. Second, lawyer advertising became pervasive, and solos and small firm lawyers found themselves drowning in a never-ending sea of billboards and TV and radio ads. For many lawyers, those ads were the kiss of death. For me, it led to a different opportunity.

While I can't compete with TV ads and billboards promising to repair broken lives, or radio commercials where announcers gladly shill for their "friends," I could deliver client-focused legal services. This enabled me to stay afloat, albeit not always easily, while I maximized other skills that the pretty faces on the billboards couldn't match; that is, my writing skills. As a result, my practice not only includes personal injury and workers' compensation matters, but also writing services for other attorneys, who are now more than half my client base. They recognize that writing, whether it is an artful complaint, a skillful answer to a motion for summary judgment or a concise appeal brief, all with no legalese, wins cases or sets them up for settlement.

These lawyers have become my billboards, telling colleagues that our writing wins. We don't always win, but we win a lot of the time, and have made the difference in countless cases. Our clients now are a mix of the public and the profession; and while we don't make as much money as the perfectly coiffed lawyers on TV, we get results that make a difference.

Judges tell us how persuasive our briefs are, and lawyers recognize that we get them to the table where they can obtain the maximum settlement for their clients. We get our own clients to the table too.

So, what's the lesson? Don't assume that your legal career will take you in a particular direction. Don't assume that you only need one practice area, because it may disappear tomorrow. Don't assume that you can't change and adapt. You can. I did. As a result, my writing skills, which I expected would put me on the front page of *The New York Times*, take my words into courtrooms throughout the region, and help countless people. Our appellate victories have expanded the law for numerous injured people, and our other briefs have helped countless victims be compensated.

All the while, I'm happy that I get to write every day. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court may not be *The New York Times*, but it has become a place where I feel very comfortable. Which isn't a bad result for a creature of habit who refused to be a one-trick pony.

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