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First steps for attorneys striking out on their own.

Bridget Heos

Hanging a shingle is a dream for many attorneys, but it is also a gamble. Here's how some young attorneys struck out on their own or with a colleague -- without going broke.

1. Get the door; it's opportunity

Four years out of **law** school, Amy Gervich, of St. Louis, was ready to leave her large **firm**. She asked a fellow alumnus whether she could join his then **solo-practice firm** as an associate. He said Gervich should be his partner instead.

It would be a steep learning curve. At her **firm**, Gervich represented corporations in products-liability and asbestos cases. She never talked to clients; the partners did. And she never stepped foot in a courtroom.

In her new partnership, she would practice family **law** and criminal defense.

But that drastic change was what she wanted.

"I didn't think that I was ready," she said. "But when opportunity knocks, take it."

Learning from experience was sometimes the best way, she said. But she also took CLEs.

Now, she enjoys the one-on-one time with clients, especially helping people who are having family trouble.

"I've had attorneys say they can tell I really care about my clients," Gervich said.

The firm has added two other partners to become Hart, Sheth, Boedefeld & Gervich.

2. Build your business one client at a time

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It's easy to get overwhelmed when you think of how many clients you need to make a profit.

But when Sherri Harris, of Branson, started her own firm soon after law school, she learned that a couple of clients were all she needed to build her business.

One was her bank; the other, a client who some lawyers in the small town wouldn't take. But he had a good point - he pays his bills on time.

To gain more clients, she placed an ad in the phone book with her picture. That way, people might recognize her from the courthouse, where she had worked briefly for the prosecutor's office. Business grew after starting with just two clients.

3. Take every client who walks through the door

Often, growing your business means taking less-than-ideal clients, whether that include a feuding family or somebody who might not pay his bill. And you definitely have to diversify.

Heath Stuart graduated from law school one year ago. Immediately, he started a solo practice in Leawood, Kan., though he handles mostly Missouri cases. He works from about 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. on matters ranging from divorce to Internet copyright.

"I take almost every case that walks through the door," he said. "Coming out of law school, you're going to have to take everything because you've got to make money."

3. Then specialize

Eric Eighmy, of Branson, said he started out taking most clients. But once he got a cash flow, he pared down his practice to areas he enjoyed: immigration, domestic, municipal and criminal law.

Now, his advice is, "Practice in an area you like, and don't dabble. If you don't know the answer right away or know where to find it, don't take the case. It will just sit on the corner of your desk and make everybody mad, including yourself."

He also learned to turn down cases, such as when he thinks he won't get paid.

Another lawyer told him: "Better to be looking at a case wanting in, than to be in a case wanting out."

Jason Faust, of St. Louis, agrees.

He went into **solo** practice right out of **law** school after determining during an internship that he didn't want to work at a large **firm**.

"I saw lawyers working 60 to 80 hours, and I didn't want to be like them," he said. "Little did I know that I'd be working 60 to 80 hours now."

For that reason, he said, it was important to be selective about what kind of law he practiced.

"If you're going to be your own boss, you've got to enjoy what you're doing," he said.

4. Sell your car; hire a secretary

"Sell your car, ride a bike, and get a secretary," Faust said. "If you don't have a live person on the phone, they'll hire someone else."

Harris agreed that it was important to have a knowledgeable staff, including a paralegal with experience. That way, when you're starting out, at least one of you will know what you're doing.

"You come out of law school, and you don't even know how to file a motion," Harris said. "Get a paralegal that's been around. Pay her a lot of money, and show her that you value her."

Of course, when you're in solo practice, money can be tight.

Some lawyers hire an answering service to handle their phone calls. That way, they can reduce overhead by working from home.

5. Share an office

Sharing an office has benefits other than reducing overhead. You can swap ideas and refer clients to each other. Some offices also share supplies.

But Harris said that even if you're not in business together, it's important to choose the other lawyers in your office wisely.

"It's kind of like being married," she said. "You'd better get along."

6. Get connected

Solo practice lawyers also count on attorneys outside the office for help.

This could be a friend you can call to collaborate on a big case, members of your local bar association or a Listserv where several lawyers offer advice and assistance without even knowing each other.

One such group is the Missouri Bar Association's small **firm** Internet group. Gervich said she had both received and given client referrals from members of this group, and she recently had a lawyer send her **firm** eight forms helpful in preparing a wrongful-death case.

7. Get help somewhere

A disadvantage of going into **solo** practice as a young lawyer is that you don't get to learn from more experienced lawyers in your **firm**. Luckily, many bar associations have mentorship programs for attorneys.

Faust said The Missouri Bar mentorship program had been invaluable to him.

Often, local bar associations offer mentorship as well.

Crista Hogan, executive director of the Springfield Metropolitan Bar Association, said its program was an important networking tool and offered courses on business issues, such as how to make your phone ring.

8. Know what you don't know

But even with the best mentors, sometimes you're going to have to learn from tougher teachers: your mistakes.

Coming out of law school chock-full of knowledge and having business experience from a previous career, Heath Stuart felt confident in himself. But soon, he learned that knowing the law and practicing it were two different things.

"You just don't know everything when you get out of law school, even though you think you do," he said. "I found out real quick I had a lot to learn."

One of those things was that you catch more flies with honey. Another: "You're going to make mistakes," he said. "When you do make a mistake, the best thing you can do is step up to the plate and admit it."

9. Be nice to clerks (and everybody else)

As a solo practice attorney, you are going to spend a lot of time in court. Harris said it was important to be nice to the clerks.

"They can be your best friend, and they can be your worst enemy," she said.

Of course, lawyers say you have to be nice to everybody in the profession. What goes around comes around.

10. Get experience

Walter Brown, who practiced in a larger firm before starting the firm Gaddy, Geiger & Brown in Kansas City with two other young attorneys, said he wanted to first chair a case in federal court and state court before going out on his own.

"There's no experience like experience," he said. "It's hard to be able to realize how hard it is to make real-time decisions until you've done it."

But he said trying cases also gave him confidence in himself.

He said he realized "if this is all there is to it, I can do it."

11. Believe in yourself

That confidence is one of the best tools for being a **solo** practice attorney.

Greg Weaver, of Steven Fenner in Springfield, left **solo** practice and joined a small **firm** for the security and mentorship opportunity. A few months later, his boss was deployed to Iraq. Weaver was on his own again.

He said he had learned to trust his instincts.

"If something doesn't sound quite right, it's not," he said. "I would go on my gut a lot."

Kyle Branson, of The Law Offices of John P. Ryan Jr. in Grandview, had a similar experience. When his boss seriously injured his back, Branson was left to manage cases on his own less than a year after passing the bar.

It's an experience he describes as baptism by fire.

Still, he said, he has confidence that he can learn how to handle whatever cases come through the door.

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He also learned that he could be strong-willed when he needed to be.

"I'm a fairly laid-back person," he said. "It's not like me to be hard-nosed about something, but when you're dealing with an insurance adjustor or opposing council, you have to do that."

12. Know when to hang it up

Sometimes, **solo** practice is a stepping stone to something else.

Although Felicia Ford, of St. Louis, always wanted to go into **solo** practice, she didn't anticipate doing it right out of **law** school. When she got a contract job handling traffic tickets for a **law firm**, she did just that.

While working 35 hours on the traffic-ticket docket, she spent evenings and weekends **running** her business and taking on new clients.

"I was working all the time," she said. "Learning how to network and get clients is a full-time job. I was not prepared for that."

In August, she quit her **solo** practice and joined a **firm**. She mainly wanted to get experience in other areas of the **law**.

But there was an added bonus to the change: "Going to work for somebody else is giving me a break," she said. "After a while, it gets overwhelming to do 100 percent of the work yourself."

She's glad she went solo for a time.

"Everything was a good experience," she said. "Traffic tickets don't seem that important to a lot of people, but I learned how to interact with clients and other lawyers and judges."

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