

Ep #92: Essential Skills to Build a Successful and Profitable Law Practice



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John E. Grant

[The Agile Attorney](#) with John E. Grant

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John: Whenever you're starting something new, whether that be a new firm, a new product offering, or even new internal policies or procedures, it's natural to want to get everything dialed in perfectly before you put it out into the world. But more often than not, that perfectionist instinct gets in the way of a truly successful rollout.

In today's episode, I'm going to talk about two related ideas that can help you find success more quickly. One is the importance of building in short feedback loops, which I've talked about before. The other is a new topic for this podcast, which is the importance of developing the essential skills that will make your new effort a success and help you build it with more clarity and confidence.

You're listening to *The Agile Attorney Podcast*, powered by Agile Attorney Consulting and Greenline Legal. I'm John Grant, and it is my mission to help legal professionals of all kinds build practices that are profitable, sustainable, and scalable for themselves and the communities they serve. Ready to become a more Agile Attorney? Let's go.

Hey everyone, welcome back. So, this week I'm going to do sort of a quick episode, and this is kind of ripped from the headlines, or at least from my headlines, based on a conversation that I had earlier in the week with a actual potential maybe consulting client for me on the Agile Attorney side, or even a potential software customer on my Greenline side. And the conversation went into a direction, and you know I don't think it's just because maybe I'm a bad salesperson, although that is a possibility, I suppose.

But I think hopefully, at least, it comes more from a place of, I think I know the right kinds of problems that I solve for, and this particular attorney that I was speaking with wasn't quite ready for any of those problems yet. And, you know, it's not that I've got the entire sales thing figured out, but I have had a fair bit of experience and training through the years, going all the way

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back to the time when I was working at Getty Images before I even became a lawyer. I was their director of sales operations for the Americas, and so I was involved in a lot of different sales conversations and trainings and things like that.

And then in the early days of my law practice and even in the early days of my consulting practice, I actually did a couple of different sales trainings and theories and all the rest.

And I would say at least the method of selling that really resonates with me and has proven to be reasonably effective is this notion of consultative selling, right? So, I'm not just selling a thing and trying to get anyone who walks by to try to buy this thing. I'm really working with my prospects and trying to figure out what is it that they need, what are the pain points they're having. And then if I think I'm the right solution for it, great, we can enter into more of a sales conversation. And if I'm not the right solution, I'm going to try to point them in the right direction. That's just kind of my approach to things.

But the way this conversation went, and this is specific to this person who their situation is they are relatively newly starting up a, for now, true solo practice. It's an experienced attorney. They've got, I think, 15-plus years of experience in a couple of different practice areas. So, lots and lots of skill and experience and knowledge on the legal services delivery side, but relatively new to the running a business side of having a solo practice.

And just in case you think, "Oh, well, this episode is only going to be right for me if I am in a similar situation," I don't think that's true. I think there's going to be some things I'll talk about here in a minute that will be useful to you when it comes to solving problems, trying new tools, software, approaches, whatever, that I think are going to be effective regardless of where you are in your particular law practice journey.

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So, the good news, this person is someone who's been listening to this podcast for a while. They will recognize themselves. I actually asked for permission to talk about their story.

So, they are wrapping their heads around Agile practices, the Kanban method, things like that, for their law practice. And the thing that they said they were trying to accomplish by reaching out to me was to make sure that all of their systems and policies and procedures were really well dialed in so that as they ramped up their law practice with new work and started really sort of leaning into their marketing and biz dev efforts, that they would have everything set up right, that things would be working well when they went to add volume.

And I totally appreciate that approach. It is natural in a lot of contexts, but it's especially natural for lawyers, right? We are risk mitigators; we're trying to avoid risk. We like it when our clients sort of ask us for proactive advice so that we can help them avoid the kinds of trouble that we know that they're likely to run into, or at least we think we're likely to run into somewhere down the road.

But some other things that I discovered in the course of this conversation, one of them is that even though this person has a vision for a particular type of law practice that isn't quite what they've been practicing before, but it's sort of a combination of a few different practice areas that they have experience in, that wasn't really what most of their current work was about.

They were taking the work that shows up, which again is totally natural for any new business. You need to generate cash flow, you need to generate the work, but they already were sort of leaning into their sort of safety zones from their past practice areas, as opposed to really focusing on what is my ideal client, how am I going to go get customers and clients for this new practice area that I envision.

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Now, the good news, or at least the convenient thing for me, is that one of these prior practice areas for this attorney was business law. And so I asked which business concepts were they familiar with, and the one that we had some overlap in is this notion of the Lean startup, right? So, really being intentional about minimum viable products and validated learning, and running a lot of small experiments to grow the business as opposed to doing a lot of big bang thinking about the business without actually colliding those ideas or those intentions with the reality of will they or won't they actually work in practice.

And you can maybe see where this is going. My advice to this attorney was, effectively, you're not quite ready for me yet, either on the Agile Attorney consulting side or on the Greenline Legal side.

And the reason why is actually hinted at in the intro to this podcast. And so I have made it really clear, obviously over several years now, that I believe that my best use is helping attorneys and other legal practitioners build practices that are profitable, sustainable, and scalable, roughly in that order. And the thing that this attorney came to me with was looking for a sustainability or a scalability solution, where really what they had right now is a profitability problem. They aren't yet bringing in enough work, at least specifically in that target practice area, to know whether the business is going to be sustainable, much less scalable.

In other words, they were kind of putting the cart before the horse in terms of wanting to solve for these consistency and templatzation problems when really what they need to do is go out and drum up some business.

Now, one of the ways that I sold this person on this idea was with a concept or a framework that I actually think is really important for everyone to pay some attention to. And that's this notion of essential skill development or essential skill training. And there's been a few different ways that describe this, but I think the best way actually is something that I've borrowed from

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Seth Godin, and it really seems to resonate with people. And it has to do with teaching kids how to ride a bike.

And the thing that Seth Godin talks about, and that I personally experienced in teaching my own kids how to ride a bike, is for many, many years, generations really, since the invention of the bicycle, the way that we have taught kids how to ride bikes is through the use of training wheels. And the reason we do that, of course, is we don't want them to fall over and hurt themselves, and the training wheels help prevent that from happening. And it's an interesting approach, but it turns out that we've kind of proven it wrong as a society.

Because when you teach a kid how to ride a bike on training wheels, what you're kind of assuming is that the essential skill to bike riding is the act of pedaling, right? That you're trying to teach a kid how to pedal a bike without falling over, and a little bit more maybe around steering a bike as well. But the pedaling is the thing, right? So they can kind of get going, not super fast, but they can really start to get the feel of pedaling a bike because the training wheels are preventing them from falling.

And then we all know what happens once you take those training wheels off, is that with a lot of kids, at least, maybe not all of them, but what happens is they tend to fall anyway, right? This act of taking the training wheels off, sometimes you can get some momentum, and I forget if it's centrifugal or centripetal force, but right, you get the force, the gyroscope effect of the wheels that helps balance the bike, things like that. All of that is true, but a great number of kids, when you remove the training wheels, they fall over anyway.

And the reason why is that we have taught the kids how to pedal the bike, but we haven't necessarily taught them how to balance on a bike. And the way we know this is because now the way that I think most kids are learning how to navigate a bicycle, ride a bike, isn't through the use of training wheels, it's through the use of stride bikes or scoot bikes.

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And this is how my kids learned, and let me tell you, it was fantastic. And so for those of you that aren't familiar, and most of you probably are at this point, right, the thing about a scoot bike is the kid gets on the quote unquote seat, and sometimes even the seat is like really low, and they basically, at first, they can just walk with a bike between their legs. And that's enough because they're getting a little bit of a feel for it.

Then when they sit on the seat, there's no pedals on this thing, by the way. I should have mentioned that. That is the essential thing about it. They sit on the seat, and they can walk, and then eventually they realize that if they push off just a little bit harder, they can glide just for a second or two. And that feels fun, that feels cool. We all know how cool that feels if you're a bike rider in any form at all, and so they want more of that.

And so they then, through their own curiosity and initiative, will take longer and longer steps and take more and more time with their feet off the ground in between those steps. And kind of before you know it, they're gliding around the parking lot or the playground or wherever you are on this bike, even though there's no pedals, they're able to ride the thing and glide the thing.

And what this has sort of proven is that the essential skill of riding a bike isn't pedaling, it's balance. And the scoot bike, the stride bike, it teaches balance. And then once you have the balance down, the pedaling is relatively straightforward.

The thing we talked about earlier in the week with this attorney is that the essential skill for new practitioners, new legal business owners, and usually that's solos, isn't doing the legal work, it's getting the work. And so the rest of our conversation, we really focused on what are some steps that this person can take to try to get cases in the door, and not just any cases, but cases in the practice area that they want to practice.

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And because I'm a consultant and sort of a coach at heart, I actually issued him a challenge, sort of an accountability partnership thing, which is that he try to find two new clients within that practice area by the end of this month. And so the conversation was sort of right around the middle of the month, and the challenge is, what can you do to try to bring in two of your ideal clients, your ideal case types, before the end of the month?

And then we kind of had a little bit of a deeper conversation about specific strategies around that. I won't go deep into it other than to say that my advice, I think, is pretty consistent with a lot of people's advice, which is your best efforts in marketing a new practice area is typically through networking and referral marketing rather than all of the other things like SEO and Google ads and keyword marketing and blah, blah, blah, right?

I think getting out and talking to people is really the best place to start. If for no other reason than you get real-time feedback from those people about what you're talking about, right? They might tell you to your face, "You know, we don't really have any need for that, and I don't know anybody who does," which isn't necessarily what you want to hear, but that would be incredibly valuable feedback if you got it, especially if you got it from two or three or four people.

And I'll actually call back to one of the earliest episodes I did on this podcast. It doesn't actually have an episode number because it kind of pre-dates the current format of this podcast. But if you look at the very beginning of my feed, there is a bonus episode that is one of my voice of the client episodes, and the one you're looking for is the interview with Dennis, who is a financial planner.

And Dennis has some really great advice about networking and referral marketing for attorneys. For him, specifically, attorneys that are looking for estate planning work, but I think the advice that he gives is really applicable

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to anyone engaging in networking and referral marketing type strategies. So, go look for that. I'll put a link straight to it in the show notes.

But looping back for a second to the Lean startup idea, right? The reason that I gave this attorney the challenge of trying to get two of those clients by the end of the month is it's something of a SMART goal, right? It's specific, it's measurable, it is achievable, it's relevant, and it's time-bound. So I'm a big fan of SMART goals.

The other is that it forces a feedback loop. And if at the end of the month, he looks up and he has those two clients, and he's like, "Great, I'm onto something. I think I can build this business around this thing." If he doesn't have those two clients, that doesn't mean it's not a good idea or the right business. Maybe the strategy he used wasn't working. Maybe the tactics he was using inside of those strategies, or that strategy, could have been better, right?

It's not like a nail in the coffin, but it still is information, and it's feedback, and it allows whoever is using this approach to actually course correct and then figure out what else can I try that might work a little bit better, right? Either that's doubling down on the thing that I did that was successful, or that is a pivot from the thing that I tried that didn't really work the way I expected it to.

And so that's my takeaway for all of you, right? Regardless of where you are in your business journey, in your practice journey, it's easy when we're thinking about designing these new tools, these new systems, these new products, these new practice areas, whatever it happens to be, we want to get into the ideal perfect design world where we can kind of live in our heads and we don't actually have to collide it with the reality of will this work or won't it, right? We can be in this really kind of comfortable space where we're designing, but we're not actually being confronted with the reality of the thing.

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I'm going to encourage you to force yourself to go confront reality. Figure out what you need to do, what are the essential skills for the new venture that you're trying to spin up, again, whatever that happens to be, whether it's a totally new business or whether it's something else within your existing business, run the experiment, do it in a smart, intentional way, have a hypothesis about how it's going to work, and then frankly, use the scientific method to force a feedback loop and either validate or invalidate that hypothesis, not because we love being wrong about things, but because we need to learn what works and what doesn't.

And every feedback loop we create, every little test we run is making us smarter, and over time, it's that intelligence about the problem and the solving of the problem that is going to serve you best, not trying to come up with some pie-in-the-sky ideal design based on your assumptions about what you think is going to happen as opposed to the reality of what actually is going to happen or actually does happen once you run these tests.

And I'm going to leave it there for this week. So, thank you for listening. If you want to get a taste of my consultative selling approach, you can either go to greenline.legal and click that book a demo button. You won't always get me, but my business partners also have something of a consultative selling approach. We're pretty aligned on this. If Greenline's not the right tool for you right now, we're not going to try to force it on you, right? We really want to make sure that we're delivering on our value promise and solving very real problems inside of your practice. We're not just going to sell you a tool for the sake of selling you a tool.

And then, of course, I'm also happy to talk to you wearing my Agile Attorney hat, and if you go to agileattorney.com and look for the work with me button, you'll see the ability to book a discovery call on that side as well.

And either way, hopefully I can help you figure out what's the right order of events, what's the essential skill, what are the things that are going to help you take the next steps. And the reason I'm comfortable doing that is that I

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am pretty sure that if this attorney I spoke with earlier in the week is successful at doing business development, they're going to come back to me. And we will have an opportunity to work together when the time is right. But if I try to force us working together when the time isn't right, then that could be the end of the relationship, and that's obviously not something I want.

So, with that, this podcast, as always, gets production support from the fantastic team at Digital Freedom Productions, and our theme music is "Hello" by Lunara. Thanks for listening, and I will talk to you next week.