Why small law firms should use a fractional business development manager

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For many small law firms, growth isn't the problem: consistency is. A fractional business development manager offers a practical way to close that gap, giving firms access to senior BD expertise without the cost of a full-time hire.

Most firms already understand the importance of maintaining referral relationships, staying visible in the market and building stronger connections with existing clients. What they struggle with is finding the time to do it properly.

When you are running a small law firm, fee-earning work almost always takes priority. Partners are managing files, supervising staff, dealing with clients and trying to keep workflow moving. Business development becomes something discussed in meetings, but often pushed down the priority list when deadlines, court appearances and client demands take over.

The result is a familiar cycle: when work is strong, business development slows down; when matters begin to taper off, attention suddenly shifts to networking, LinkedIn activity, referrals and client engagement. Unfortunately, by that point, pipeline issues have already started to emerge.

This is where a fractional business development manager can make a meaningful difference.

Rather than employing a full-time business development executive, small law firms can access senior-level commercial and growth expertise on a part-time or outsourced basis. It gives firms the benefit of strategic support and accountability without the cost and commitment of a permanent hire.

For many boutique, suburban and growing firms, it is often the missing piece between relying on ad hoc referrals and building a more strategic, sustainable and predictable approach to growth.

Small law firms have a time problem, not a capability problem

Most small law firms already have the legal expertise required to grow. They deliver excellent work, maintain strong client relationships and have talented practitioners capable of building successful practices.

What they struggle with is visibility.

Good legal work matters, but clients cannot instruct a firm they do not think about. Referral partners cannot recommend lawyers they rarely hear from. Existing clients often remain unaware of other services a firm provides unless someone proactively raises the conversation.

Many small firms rely heavily on reputation and referrals, assuming good work will naturally generate consistent growth. While referrals remain an important source of new business, relying on them alone can create unpredictability.

A fractional business development manager helps create consistency around visibility and relationship-building. Instead of business development being something that happens occasionally, it becomes part of an ongoing process.

This may involve helping lawyers reconnect with referral partners, identifying opportunities to strengthen client relationships, improving how the firm presents itself online, supporting thought leadership efforts or ensuring the firm remains visible within target industries and networks. Importantly, the focus is not simply on “marketing” for the sake of activity. It is about building practical systems that support sustainable growth.

Why a full-time business development hire often doesn't make sense

For many small law firms, hiring a senior full-time business development professional can feel difficult to justify financially. A full-time hire brings salary costs, superannuation, recruitment expenses, onboarding time and management responsibilities. For firms still building scale, the investment can feel disproportionate to immediate needs.

At the same time, doing nothing carries its own risk. Without someone helping coordinate growth activities, business development often becomes fragmented and reactive. Partners intend to follow up referral contacts but become distracted by urgent client matters. Networking events are attended inconsistently. Content ideas are discussed but never published. Existing client opportunities remain unexplored simply because nobody has ownership of the process.

A fractional business development manager solves this challenge by providing experienced support at a scale that makes sense for smaller firms. Rather than paying for a full-time executive, firms gain access to senior expertise for a fraction of the cost, with support tailored to the firm’s size, priorities and growth ambitions.

For some firms, that may involve only a few days per month. For others, it may mean more hands-on support around strategy workshops, accountability and implementation.

Business development needs ownership

One of the biggest reasons business development struggles in small firms is that nobody truly owns it. Everyone agrees it is important, but responsibility is often spread across multiple people. Partners assume lawyers will generate work naturally through relationships. Lawyers assume marketing will drive visibility. Marketing teams, if they exist at all, are often focused on events, directories or administration rather than strategic growth.

Without clear ownership, opportunities fall through the cracks.

A fractional business development manager acts as the person responsible for keeping growth activities moving forward. They create structure and accountability so business development stops being something firms “should” do and starts becoming something they actually do consistently.

This can involve working with partners to strengthen referral relationships, helping lawyers become more confident in client conversations, identifying opportunities to cross-sell services across practice groups or introducing practical systems for tracking opportunities and following up prospects.

The objective is not to turn lawyers into salespeople. It is to help lawyers build stronger relationships and remain visible in ways that feel natural and commercially relevant.

Visibility matters more than ever for small firms

The legal market has changed significantly in recent times. Clients today have more choice, greater access to information and increasing expectations around responsiveness, value and commercial understanding. Larger firms continue to invest heavily in brand visibility and client engagement, while technology and artificial intelligence are reshaping expectations around legal delivery.

For small law firms, this can feel intimidating. However, competing does not necessarily mean spending more money. Small firms often have advantages that larger competitors struggle to replicate; including stronger client relationships, more personalised service and deeper local or niche expertise. The challenge is ensuring the market understands that value.

A fractional business development manager helps firms sharpen how they position themselves and communicate their expertise. Sometimes the issue is not capability, it is simply that the market does not clearly understand what makes the firm different.

An external perspective can often identify hidden opportunities, whether that means improving referral engagement, repositioning a practice area, refining pricing conversations or strengthening client communication.

In many cases, relatively small improvements can create meaningful long-term growth.

How to break the feast-or-famine cycle in business development

One of the biggest frustrations for small law firms is the constant cycle between being overwhelmed with work and worrying about where the next matter will come from.

When workflow is strong, business development stops because there is no time. When work slows, firms suddenly rush to network, reconnect with contacts and improve visibility.

The problem is that business development does not usually work immediately. Relationships take time to build. Referral trust compounds over time. Visibility grows through consistency, not bursts of activity.

A fractional business development manager helps small law firms break this cycle by ensuring growth activities continue even during busy periods. Rather than waiting for pipeline concerns to emerge, firms begin building future opportunities proactively. Over time, this creates more predictable workflow, stronger referral relationships and a more stable pipeline of work.

In a nutshell - Is a fractional business development manager right for your firm?

Most small law firms do not need access to an internal marketing team or a full-time business development executive. What they often need is someone helping create focus, accountability and momentum around growth. A fractional business development manager offers an affordable and practical solution for firms that want to strengthen visibility, deepen relationships and build a more sustainable pipeline without the cost of a permanent hire.

If business development at your firm depends on whoever has time that week, it might be time for a different approach. GSJ Consulting works with small and boutique law firms to provide fractional and outsourced business development support - get in touch to talk through what that could look like for your firm.
