

Early Hustle, Waiting, and Hard Lessons: Integrity Before Opportunity and Profits

The following narrative, drawn from personal memoir, highlights professional challenges that nearly every lawyer will encounter: maintaining integrity, gaining experience and skills, building networks and referrals, managing clients and practice demands, developing a niche, and representing individual clients. Your course materials are designed to prepare you for these realities.

Quick-Reference Takeaways for Law Students

- **Guard Your Integrity:** Ethical temptations arise in school and practice. Reputation is your most valuable asset—protect it at all costs.
- **Say Yes to Opportunities:** Take on assignments—even the small or extra ones—that help you build confidence and skills. Participate fully in mock trials and clinics.
- **Build Relationships:** Treat classmates, professors, and colleagues with professionalism—they are future allies and referral sources.
- **Make Agreements Clear and Written:** Never rely solely on verbal understandings; written agreements prevent confusion and conflict.
- **Master Business Skills:** Marketing, referral etiquette, billing discipline, and fee arrangements are as critical as knowing the law.
- **Be Persistent and Creative:** Rely on facts, documentation, and procedures—never accept opponents' claims at face value.
- **Find Your Niche Over Time:** You don't need to choose a specialty immediately; stay alert to areas where your background and interests provide unique advantages.
- **Think Beyond Winning:** Courtroom victories don't always mean success—be prepared for enforcement, collections, and client management challenges.
- **Evaluate Judgment Collectability:** Especially with contingency cases, always consider if a judgment can realistically be collected from the defendant.

- **Define Your Own Success:** There is no single formula for achievement; stay curious, ethical, and open to a path that fits your values and skills.
- **Your Path Is Unique:** Whether in litigation, transactions, academia, or public interest, adapt and hold fast to your integrity—reputation and relationships will open doors long after a single case win.

Waiting for the Phone to Ring

When I first launched my private law practice, the days were quiet and uncertain. I found myself sitting by the phone, waiting for it to ring with a new client on the other end. To make ends meet, my wife and I opened a discount real estate brokerage firm. It was a different kind of hustle—handling single-family-residential deals while dreaming of the day my law practice would take off.

At the same time, I taught Real Estate Principles, Real Estate Law, and Real Estate Finance at West Los Angeles College. Teaching helped me deepen my understanding while sharing knowledge with students. One motivated student even offered to work for me as a salesperson, bringing a group of foreign clients eager to invest in real estate. Their plan was to deposit suitcases full of cash into my real estate trust account to buy property. It was a tempting offer that could have transformed my business—but raised huge red flags. I took a deep breath and declined, politely but firmly.

Integrity mattered more than any quick deal. The lesson was clear: no matter the opportunity or temptation, principles come first. The phone would ring eventually. But reputation—once compromised—can never be fully restored.

Sure enough, that day came. Calls started flowing, cases piled up, and we left the real estate brokerage behind to focus entirely on law. My wife attended Paralegal School, graduating with a specialization in litigation.

Early Court Experience

My first office was in what would now be considered a shared workspace exclusively for attorneys—a hub for small firms and solo practitioners. Many of them had overflow work and needed an attorney to appear in court. I needed court experience. For six months, I was in court almost daily, conducting small trials, seeking writs, handling post-judgment procedures, and more. My wife, working as

a paralegal, drove me to courthouses across Los Angeles and Orange County while I reviewed case files in the car. That whirlwind of activity prepared me for the real responsibilities to come.

Building Referral Networks

Referral networks are a critical source of professional growth for lawyers.

My referral network began with my very first case, which came through my wife's uncle, an out-of-state attorney. It was a collection action against a stock manipulator. With ample time to devote, I mounted a full-court press and secured recovery for my client. Surprisingly, about a year later, that same defendant referred a substantial business client to me—one I represented for several years.

Referrals soon began to come from many directions. Some came from my real-estate students, while others came through friends from prior jobs. During my 2L and 3L years in law school, I also worked in financial modeling. A banker I met while building computerized bankruptcy-forecasting models later became a branch manager in Beverly Hills and asked me to supervise loan closings.

My experience as Compliance Director for a regional securities-brokerage firm also led to referrals. In that role, I interacted closely with sales representatives and back-office personnel, many of whom faced legal problems outside of work. One employee, for example, became embroiled in a construction dispute after a roofing supplier filed a mechanic's lien on his home, despite the fact that he had fully paid his general contractor. Because multiple roofs and suppliers were involved, the plaintiff could not prove which materials went into my client's roof, and the case was resolved in my client's favor.

Around the same time, colleagues from the securities industry who were starting a brokerage firm sought my assistance. Their legal needs ultimately exceeded my resources, so I referred them to a major law firm. Referrals also came in unexpected ways. For instance, after meeting a corporate

General Counsel during a job interview for a prospectus-drafting role I didn't want, I suggested the opportunity to a former classmate who specialized in that field. He got the job, and through that connection the corporation later referred litigation work to me.

Other referrals came from brokerage firms whose brokers took on investors who had been harmed elsewhere. When conflicts did not arise, General Counsels sent those cases my way.

In another example, an employee of a brokerage client who later joined a different firm asked me to represent that firm in a customer dispute. The matter went to trial, where the customer represented himself before a jury. He insisted on testifying in narrative form, but after my objection, the judge required him to frame each point as a question to himself, giving me the opportunity to object. To my surprise, the customer performed this unusual process fairly well, but in the end my client prevailed.

Referrals from Other Attorneys: What Every New Law Student Should Know **Attorney Referrals: Lessons from Experience**

Attorney referrals play a crucial role in legal practice. They create opportunities to build new client relationships, but they also carry challenges. Lawyers often refer cases that are too small, outside their specialty, or simply not a good fit for their practice. For that reason, it's important to proceed carefully. When sending a referral, be sure the recipient is fully qualified. When receiving one, evaluate why it's being passed on and whether it's worth your investment of time and resources.

From my own practice, several experiences stand out:

- **Referral from a Neighboring Attorney:**
An attorney who maintained a very specialized, non-litigation practice in our office suite once referred me a complex case. His friend, a non-practicing lawyer, had been sued personally for corporate debt as a director on a company's board. The plaintiff sought to pierce the corporate veil. My client refused to settle, leading to extensive discovery and a demanding trial. He ultimately prevailed. Despite the fees greatly exceeding what settlement would have cost, I voluntarily reduced my bill by more than half. That client became a close personal friend and referred many others to me in later years.
- **Referral from Former Opposing Counsel:**
About a year after concluding a case, an opposing counsel—who had left practice of representing investors in securities lawsuits—transferred his

cases to me to complete. With his clients' consent, we entered a written referral-fee agreement. After the first settlement, I sent him a \$10,000 check exactly as agreed, but he had completely forgotten about the arrangement.

- **Referral from a Large Firm Attorney:**
Another attorney from a prominent law firm referred me a matter against a stock brokerage firm. With the client's approval, we entered into a written referral-fee agreement. When the case settled, I sent \$3,000 to the firm. By then, the referring attorney had left, creating confusion in the firm's accounting department. I clarified the agreement with the firm and informed the referring attorney of what happened.
- **Referral from a Criminal Lawyer:**
A criminal defense attorney once sent a civil case my way. He explained that the civil lawyers who typically referred criminal cases to him all knew each other, so referring within that circle would be awkward. He never requested a referral fee. I took the case, but insisted on a substantial retainer up front.
- **Referral from a Senior Partner:**
Through one of my clients, I was introduced to a Senior Partner at a major law firm. He later called, requesting that I represent an individual, emphasizing that the other partners respected my work. However, as I had no relationships with others in the firm and it was unclear why the firm could not take the matter itself, I declined.

These experiences reinforced several principles: the importance of clear written agreements, prudent fee arrangements, and candid communication. They also showed me that even seasoned lawyers can overlook referral details, and that every referral carries not just legal lessons, but insights into professional trust and human nature.

Finding Clients Through Marketing

When ethical rules allowed mail solicitation, I sent letters to stock-brokerage firms across Southern California, explaining that I represented several firms in the industry and welcomed more business. This led to several new clients.

I purchased advertisements in an accounting journal. That produced no result.

Joining Arbitration Panels

I applied for and served as an arbitrator with several organizations, including the National Association of Securities Dealers (NASD, now FINRA), the New York Stock Exchange, the Pacific Stock Exchange, and the Los Angeles Superior Court. These experiences provided valuable insight into how decisions are reached and disputes resolved.

First Jury Trial

My ongoing securities connections eventually led to a pivotal opportunity. The General Counsel of the largest regional stock brokerage firm asked if I would handle a small conversion (customers refused to return a misdelivered stock certificate) case on contingency. It became my first jury trial. I learned how to select a jury, present opening and closing arguments, and draft jury instructions. After an hour of deliberation, the jury asked a revealing question: “*What does the plaintiff want in punitive damages?*” They returned a verdict strongly favoring my client. After the verdict, the firm continued to rely on my services. I was thankful for the opportunity.

More Lessons in Integrity

A non-attorney mentor from the securities industry introduced me to a friend responsible for hiring outside counsel at another stock brokerage firm. I handled four cases with favorable results—but suddenly, the work stopped. Later, my mentor explained that his friend expected personal benefits from the lawyers he engaged for his firm—something I would not provide. That ended the relationship.

The General Counsel of a securities brokerage firm I represented obtained a securities sales license to earn additional income by selling investments to customers of his firm. The firm was a very significant client of mine. He approached me with an offer to invest in a tax-sheltered windmill project. After reviewing the prospectus, I concluded it would likely result in a loss. I then calculated the commission he would have earned from that sale to me and instead purchased a sufficient amount of high-grade municipal bonds (AAA-rated, paying over 10% tax-exempt interest) through him, so that he received the same commission. The firm remained a major client, and the bonds continued to perform for years without being called by the issuer.

A prospective client came to me after failing to respond timely to a federal-court summons and complaint. A request for default had already been entered against him. He sought to have the default set aside, which would have required me to submit a declaration stating my belief that, had the default not been entered, the outcome would have been different. After reviewing the record, I declined representation for two reasons. First, such a declaration would not have been truthful. Second, engaging in conduct that jeopardizes an attorney's professional license creates potential exposure to coercion or extortion.

Memorable Opposing Counsel Stories

Not all opposing counsel were cooperative. Once, the opposition claimed all relevant documents were destroyed in a warehouse fire. By calling the secretary of the branch office where records originated as a witness, I uncovered duplicate files hidden in the office basement.

In another case, after my client's win, opposing counsel sent a letter declaring that his firm's partners had unanimously voted me the most unpleasant attorney they had ever dealt with. I thanked them for the recognition and reminded that if their client didn't promptly pay the arbitration award, my client would petition a court to confirm the arbitration award and seize their client's assets. Payment followed soon after.

Defining a Niche

Gradually, I found myself working more often in financial and investment litigation. Each new engagement and collaboration taught me something new and helped shape the direction of my practice. Brokerage firms often faced disputes, but few lawyers combined trial experience with inside knowledge of brokerage operations. Large law firms existed but were expensive and needed educating about the industry. My combined expertise allowed me to deliver effective, efficient, and valuable representation.

Managing Clients and Collecting Fees

In the Law and Motion Department one morning, I overheard a judge wisecrack, "There's nothing worse than clients—well, except no clients." I smiled at that, recalling a particularly memorable tax-shelter client of my own.

These tax-shelter investments were advertised as goldmines of deductions, but only if buyers jumped through a few IRS hoops—which, more often than not, they didn’t. That was usually when lawsuits flew, and my client preferred quiet settlements to keep the wheels of commerce turning.

My client, however, was chronically slow to pay my fees. The breakthrough came when I learned its General Counsel had a soft spot for chocolate. Each time she released a payment, I made sure a pound of Little John’s finest from Fairfax Market found its way to her desk. It worked, at least for a while. Eventually the sweet bribery lost its magic, unpaid invoices piled up, and I suggested they might want to find another attorney.

I was still the attorney of record on several federal cases, but my soon-to-be-former client agreed to and did substitute a large law firm in my place. I filed an attorney’s lien on my former client’s cases with the Federal Court. That ensured no case could settle without my fees being paid first—and so they were, in full. Much later, I heard that my former client’s slow-pay habit stayed put. Word was, the new lawyers were left chasing down hundreds of thousands in unpaid bills.

Some things, like a gift of chocolate or the hope of getting tax benefits, only last for a short time and can be gone quickly. But if someone owes money and doesn’t pay their bills, that debt stays around for a long time and can cause problems until it is paid off.

In another case, I represented a client on a contingency-fee basis. That client chose to settle directly with a scammer without informing me. When I found out—through the scammer, no less—the client insisted I wasn’t owed a fee since he handled it himself. I had to point him back to the Representation Agreement, explaining that legal obligations cannot simply be ignored.

Representing “Mom and Pop” Investors

I also represented individual investors—the “mom and pops.” Helping them seek justice after their devastating financial losses was deeply fulfilling. Looking back, I imagine how much more efficient some complex contingency cases could have been with today’s AI tools, for both me and the clients relying on me.

Obtaining a judgment in court is only the beginning of the legal process. Before accepting a prospective plaintiff's case on a contingency basis, an attorney must evaluate the likelihood of actually collecting on any judgment awarded. Key considerations include determining whether the defendant's assets are traceable, assessing the risk of the defendant seeking bankruptcy protection, and deciding if the services of a collection specialist will be necessary—potentially reducing the fee available for the attorney.

While representing a “mom-and-pop” client in a lawsuit against a rare-coin investment firm, I was asked by opposing counsel, during a wait for courtroom assignment, to postpone the trial and enter settlement negotiations. We adopted a strategic approach by proposing a Mutual Release and Stipulation to Judgment. Under this proposal, the plaintiff would agree to continue the trial, and the defendant would commit to making installment payments on an agreed amount. If the defendant fulfilled the payment schedule, the plaintiff would request dismissal of the case with prejudice, potentially reducing the total payment obligation. Conversely, if any payments were missed or delayed, the plaintiff could file the Stipulation, resulting in judgment being entered against the defendant. The parties reached a settlement, the defendant made all required payments on time, and the case was dismissed with no judgment entered on the public record against the defendant.

Two of my former real-estate students invested in and operated a small hamburger stand. When they decided to sell, they signed a six-month exclusive listing agreement with a business broker. After three months passed without any communication or progress, they terminated that arrangement and engaged a different broker. The second broker sold the business in less than a month. The first broker then filed a lawsuit, demanding a commission. During our investigation, we discovered that this broker had a practice of listing businesses with no real intention of assisting in a sale. Instead, he tracked business transactions and then pursued commission claims through litigation. A review of local court records under his name confirmed a pattern of such lawsuits. When we presented these findings to the broker, he promptly dismissed his case. It is worth noting that both young and experienced lawyers must be cautious in situations like this: it can be improper—even construed as extortion—to threaten someone with reporting criminal activity unless they take or refrain from a particular action.

The court's 1983 written opinion in one "mom and pop" case, [*Sulek v. BSA*](#), remains accessible online. I hadn't met opposing counsel before trial day. In the courthouse assignment room, I noticed an immaculately dressed attorney walking with an air of superiority. I told my paralegal, "I feel sorry for the poor *schlep* who has to face him." The surprise? That "poor *schlep*" was me. My client prevailed.

I handled another case involving a client who lost money in a real estate investment through a broker. We sued the broker, but he failed to appear or defend the lawsuit. As a result, we obtained a default judgment. While at first glance this might seem like a victory, in reality defaults can signal trouble for plaintiffs. A defendant who defaults often does so because they lack assets, or because they have managed to hide them so effectively that collection is unlikely. Despite our diligent efforts to enforce the judgment, we found no assets. The broker eventually fled to Germany. Fortunately, my client was able to recover through the Department of Real Estate's Consumer Recovery Account, which is a fund created to compensate victims in exactly these kinds of situations.

One "mom and pop" client had been scammed. A cold caller persuaded him to invest in a vague investment opportunity, even sending a messenger to collect his check. We traced where the funds were deposited, confirmed the money remained in the account, filed suit, obtained an ex-parte attachment order, and froze the account. I expected the scammer's attorney to call me, and the client would recover all the funds. The scammer called the client. Unfortunately, my client chose to settle, without my prior knowledge, with the scammer directly and accepted less than the full amount owed.

A Path Less Traveled

General Motors once built many brands in many colors—proving there is never just one way to do things. The same is true in the law: there are countless paths, and your journey will be uniquely your own.

Over my career, I discovered that law can open doors in ways I hadn't imagined. It gave me the freedom, earlier than I ever expected, to design a life where exploration and the pursuit of justice go hand in hand.

As you embark on your first year of law school, know this: there is no single formula for success. Stay curious, remain true to your values, and trust that your own path—even if it looks different from others—can be just as rewarding.

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