ATTORNEY SPOTLIGHT SERIES:

Erin Tenner on Finding Your Niche

"I didn't want to be an attorney."

That sentiment seems odd now, looking back on Erin Tenner's 30+ years as a lawyer, yet it's not an entirely uncommon story for folks in the legal profession. "I wanted to have my own business," she says. "But I was interested in law and I love learning."

As a transactional attorney with **Gray•Duffy, LLP**, Tenner has carved out her own niche in a crowded legal market by focusing on helping auto dealers with the legal facets of buying and selling and owning auto dealerships, including real property and corporate transactions.

But, as you may have guessed, her path there wasn't part of her plan.

TRANSACTIONAL V. LITIGATION

Perhaps one of the first questions an aspiring attorney must ask themselves is, should they focus on the transactional or litigation side of the profession? For Tenner, the answer became clear during moot court competition in law school.

She won best oral advocate on both sides of the argument, and the judges said she had a natural talent. "But there was nothing natural about it," Tenner says with a laugh. "It was a ton of work."

Gaining a clear understanding of the time demands on a litigator, Tenner instead decided to focus on business law and keeping clients out of court. That decision allowed her the flexibility to, among other things, have a family.

Besides, explains Tenner, she has always enjoyed the attention to detail that transactional work requires. Now that she has fewer family demands, she can occasionally assist with drafting legal arguments for the complex litigation her clients sometimes get involved in. "Diversity is fun," she says. "And that can be found even within a particular practice area."

SHOULD YOU SPECIALIZE?

Another growing question confronting new attorneys is the decision to specialize in a particular practice area. The law provides for certain legal specialties and representing auto dealers is not one of them. But it still requires a level of expertise, as do many niche practices that don't have their own "specialty" for which an attorney can be certified in California.

After law school, Tenner sought out a job that would give her client contact with business owners. She found one within a firm that represented auto dealerships. After a few months in the practice, the head partner, who had hired her to help with buy/sells, suffered a stroke. That meant that many of his responsibilities fell into her lap.

"Fortunately, because the firm was small and I had specifically asked to jump in head first with client contact, I had learned enough, that I could handle the work," Tenner explains. "And I've been doing it ever since."

But not all lawyers will have the same type of journey, and you may not find yourself seeking a path. For those aspiring attorneys searching for direction, Tenner recommends looking for work in the area of the legal profession that excites you and then pursuing that passion. "Having a niche gives lawyers additional credibility," she says.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR SPECIALIZATION

On the surface, it may seem like limiting a practice to a particular area of expertise also means limiting your potential client base. On the contrary, Tenner says it's just the opposite. "I think it's much easier to find clients," she explains. "People hear that that's what you do, and they want somebody that has that expertise."

Her logic is simple: instead of hiring a more generalized lawyer who may know what to do, but will likely take longer to do it even if they do figure it out, she's noticed clients will seek out a dedicated expert who absolutely knows what to do in that specific practice area and can do it more efficiently. "There's a certain comfort level that I bring to clients in my work because I have been doing it for so long and know it so well."

NICHE OR NOT, HERE'S WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT...

Remember how this story started? Tenner didn't want to be a lawyer. That's because, at the time, she thought lawyers had a bad reputation—indeed, a common perception is that lawyers care more about making money than they do about helping their clients.

Deserved or not, it was a philosophical hurdle she had to overcome, and overcome it she did. "I've always been very diligent about doing the best job I can for my clients. I try to think about what I would want if I was hiring an attorney, and then treat clients that way."

Tenner also stresses the importance of professional ethics. Most clients appreciate it. She notes that she has come to respect the profession. "I think professional integrity and ethics are important" says Tenner. "Because they protect the clients and the profession."

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