

Advice for New Barristers

*'Young man, I had the benefit of being born looking like a barrister but you unfortunately on the other hand didn't. But I intend to help you.'*¹

I have been asked what advice I would give to those being called to the Bar this year. After 16 years at the Bar, I feel I am in a position to offer some practical advice.

1. Don't work too hard

Many new barristers work late hours agonizing over cases. Remember the law of diminishing returns. In one hour, I can write an essay on any subject. It will not be twice as good if I spend two hours on it or five times as good if I spend five hours. So, set time limits. Stop working at 6pm and spend time with your friends and family.

A barrister in London once told me, 'If you're working at 10pm it means you stuffed something up.' If you are having difficulties, ask for help. Just don't be the barrister who is always trying to dump their work on others. Once you have made a solid attempt, run it by your tutor.

2. Find a Good Mentor

A good mentor requires two qualities - they must be competent and they must be willing to spend time helping you. These qualities do not often coincide. There are plenty of competent barristers who won't give you the time of day. Likewise, there are many incompetent barristers who will be delighted to give you bad advice. If your tutors lack either of these qualities, then find someone else.

3. Ask For Help

Don't let arrogance bring you down. The only stupid question is the one you don't ask. Don't be afraid to ask foolish questions, but do so in private. Remember that your job is to get the best result for your client, not to avoid appearing foolish. Once you have prepared a matter, run it by your mentor. Give them a summary of the facts and issues and how you intend to run the case. They will often see it from a different point of view and raise matters that you have missed.

4. Learn From Your Mistakes

You will make terrible mistakes in your career. It is unavoidable. What matters is how you respond to them. I have seen many practitioners in court making the same mistake over and over and blaming everyone but themselves.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/law/baby-barista-blog/2011/jul/14/1>

Judicial officers will be very lenient with new practitioners but that good will quickly run out if they keep on making the same mistakes. When you have a disaster – and you will – ask for advice. Tell your mentor, so they can tell you what you did wrong and what you should have done. Then don't do it again. Disasters can be painful and humiliating but experience is the best teacher if you pay attention and have the humility to change.

5. Have a Marketing Strategy

Running a business is different to being an employee. In every business, you have to get the work before you can do the work. The best carpenter in Sydney won't make any money if he doesn't have any work. It is the same for barristers. You have to get the work before you can do the work.

This means you have to set aside time and money for marketing. In fact, you may have to spend 50% of your time getting the work in. Many of my colleagues complain that they don't have enough work. Their marketing strategy is nothing more than waiting for the phone to ring.

Today, people find lawyers by looking on the internet – both clients and solicitors. Clients and solicitors will judge you by your online presence before they even meet you. This means you must have a slick website, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel. So, go to every function and social event, meet every solicitor there and give them your card. That will lead them to your website and hopefully to a brief.

6. Always Be Polite

The Bar is a panopticon, people are watching you at all times. Be polite and courteous to everyone you meet, especially in the courthouse. Everyone is a potential client or source of work. An arrogant or dismissive manner will not win you friends or work. If you are rude to anyone, they will remember it and tell others. If you are rude to any court staff (no matter their position), you can rest assured that they will tell their colleagues.

7. Try New Things

When you find yourself with free time (that can't be spent on marketing), then learn about a new area of law. Ask your colleagues if you can assist with their matters and don't dismiss an area because it doesn't have prestige. After many years at the Bar, I discovered the NSW Civil & Administrative Tribunal which is now a steady source of work and income.

8. Love the Job

If you don't love being a barrister, then don't do it. Any job is torture if you don't enjoy it. If you are smart enough to be a barrister, then you are smart enough to do something else. After five years at the Bar, I left and enrolled at medical school. I'm

now back at the Bar and appreciate both the work and the lifestyle. I manage my own time and staff and take great pride in the work that I do.

I am available every day if want some career advice.

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