Law School's Missed Lessons: What Cross-Selling Truly Takes

By **Isaac Greaney and Christopher Kim** (February 18, 2026)

While law school teaches everything from civil procedure to stare decisis, there are some aspects of practicing law that aren't covered during the three years that lead up to the bar exam. In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys offer advice on navigating real-world aspects of legal practice that are often overlooked in law school. If there is a professional skill you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.


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Law school teaches lawyers how to analyze problems in isolation. In the real world, clients rarely present a single, neatly contained legal issue.

A commercial dispute triggers employment questions. A transaction raises regulatory, tax or data-privacy concerns. Yet many early-career lawyers are trained — implicitly if not explicitly — to stay in their lane.

Clients are real people or businesses with a wide range of legal, regulatory and strategic concerns that often extend far beyond the specific scope of any individual engagement.

One of the most valuable skills missing from the law school curriculum is cross-selling. Not the sales-driven version that lawyers often fear — and most clients don't appreciate — but the ability to recognize when a client's issue extends beyond one's specialty or specific engagement scope and to connect that client with the right expertise.

When executed well, cross-selling enhances client outcomes, deepens internal collaboration and accelerates professional growth. When this need is ignored or cross-selling is done poorly, it limits both client value and a lawyer's perceived role.

This skill is particularly important for lawyers in their first decade of practice, when visibility, trust and internal credibility are being established. Developing relationships based on trust with clients and contacts early in your career leads to more rewarding advisory relationships and, over time, a more successful and lucrative career.

What Cross-Selling Is — and Is Not

Cross-selling is often misunderstood as pushing additional services or manufacturing work. In practice, effective cross-selling looks far more like sound professional judgment and problem-solving than salesmanship. You become a trusted resource to help the client find the assistance they need, whether through you, someone else at your firm or another lawyer altogether.

At its core, it involves recognizing overlap. A litigator handling a contract dispute may hear facts that raise employment, tax or regulatory concerns. A corporate lawyer advising on a transaction may uncover compliance, governance or cybersecurity issues. Cross-selling means noticing those signals and introducing the client to the lawyer best equipped to address them.

The long-term goal is to build relationships where the client comes to you for advice on solving a wide variety of problems — even when they know that you are not the lawyer they can use. This includes a client relying on you to help them find a lawyer (or expert, accountant or arbitrator) even when another lawyer at your firm is not an option because of geography, pricing, conflicts or other factors.

"Do you have lawyers at your firm who can handle [fill in the blank]?" is a sign of a strong relationship, but "I have [blank] problem, can you help me find the best solution?" is a sign of an invaluable one. Lawyers who get the second type of question have established trust and demonstrated that they can look out for the client's best interests even when there is no clear financial interest involved.

Why Cross-Selling Matters

Better Client Outcomes

The most important benefit of cross-selling is better problem-solving. Clients value lawyers who anticipate issues they have not yet fully articulated. In practice, clients often remember the lawyer who identified the next risk more clearly than the lawyer who executed the immediate task flawlessly.

Research across professional services shows that expanding work with existing clients significantly improves retention because it builds trust. Clients view broader involvement as proof that their lawyer understands the business as a whole, leading to better and more timely advice.

This can be a double-edged sword, however. When a client retains you across multiple practices, the client expects — or should, anyway — that your engagement in each subarea will be informed by your overall knowledge of the client's business and legal challenges. A sure-fire way for cross-selling to backfire is when the client does not reap the benefits.

If you have practice silos, someone, preferably you, needs to stand above those silos and make certain that the client is gaining efficiency and holistic advice.

Stronger Internal and External Relationships

Cross-selling also promotes collaboration within firms that often operate in parallel rather than in concert. Introducing a colleague from another practice group is not simply sharing work; it is building an internal alliance. Over time, those relationships foster reciprocal introductions, informal mentoring, and inclusion in matters that junior and midlevel lawyers might otherwise never see.

Externally, lawyers who consistently make thoughtful introductions tend to become referral hubs within their professional networks. Clients and contacts come to see those lawyers not merely as specialists, but as connectors who understand the broader legal landscape. That reputation compounds.

Compensation Follows Value

Although cross-selling can lead to origination credit, bonuses or increased billable hours, focusing on compensation misses the point.

Lawyers who prioritize helping clients holistically tend to generate revenue naturally. Lawyers who prioritize revenue tend to erode trust. The financial upside follows judgment, not the other way around.

The reality is that regardless of how talented you and your firm may be in a given type of transaction or dispute, there are very likely to be others that are equally or nearly as talented. Differentiators are extremely valuable. One of those is being a resource to the client irrespective of whether the meter is running.

Financial rewards flow from being a trusted gatekeeper, enabling you to pursue opportunities that arise and are in the best interests of the client.

Common Cross-Selling Missteps

Cross-selling usually fails not because lawyers are overly aggressive, but because they are hesitant or unfocused.

One common mistake is raising the prospect of additional services before sufficient trust exists. Another is talking more than listening: Clients rarely respond well to lawyers who identify needs the client has not acknowledged. Failing to follow up after spotting a potential issue is another frequent breakdown.

Lawyers also undermine cross-selling by overpromising on behalf of another practice group without first confirming fit or availability. Cross-selling works best when framed as an introduction, not a solution.

Finally, some lawyers avoid cross-selling altogether out of concern for internal politics or client ownership. In practice, clients are far more frustrated by missed issues than by shared relationships.

How Lawyers Can Develop the Skill

Cross-selling is not innate. It is learned.

First, lawyers should become conversant — not expert — in adjacent practice areas that frequently intersect with their clients' work. Internal continuing legal education, informal conversations with colleagues and exposure to different matters all help build this awareness. The goal is not mastery, but recognition.

Second, client conversations should include open-ended questions that extend beyond the immediate assignment. Asking what else is happening in the client's business often reveals issues that would otherwise remain hidden. Curiosity, not interrogation, drives insight.

Third, lawyers must synthesize what they hear. Patterns emerge quickly when lawyers listen carefully: A litigation matter reveals compliance gaps; a transaction exposes governance or financing concerns. Tracking these observations — whether in a client relationship management tool, a notebook or through informal follow-ups — helps turn awareness into action.

Importantly, cross-selling should be selective. Not every issue requires an introduction, and restraint matters. The most effective cross-sellers are trusted precisely because they do not pursue every possible angle, but critically assess when and how they can really help the client.

Why Early-Career Lawyers Have an Advantage

Junior and midlevel lawyers often underestimate their ability to cross-sell. In reality, they are well positioned to do so.

They spend more time in the factual weeds, hear more unguarded client comments and often have more frequent touchpoints with clients. They also face fewer entrenched assumptions about ownership and are often perceived as less self-interested.

When done thoughtfully, cross-selling allows early-career lawyers to add value beyond their billable roles and to be seen internally as engaged, business-minded professionals rather than task executors.

Conclusion

Cross-selling is not a rainmaker skill reserved for partners. It is a habit that can — and should — be developed early.

Lawyers who treat client conversations as opportunities to understand the full landscape, rather than just the immediate task, consistently create more value. Over time, those lawyers become indispensable — not because they know everything, but because they know who should be involved and when.

In a profession built on trust, sound judgment and relationships, the ability to cross-sell compounds faster than any technical skill taught in law school.

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