

5 Ways PL Attys Can Boost Chances Of Becoming Partner

By **Emily Field**

Law360, New York (September 19, 2016, 6:54 PM EDT) -- Young product liability attorneys hoping to make partner have their work cut out for them in terms of becoming well-versed in this science-heavy and fact-intensive arena of litigation.

While it's important to learn how to grapple with scientific treatises and engineering documents, while also gaining a reputation for dependably producing quality work, there are a number of other skills young attorneys should put under their belts if they hope to become partner, attorneys said.

"I'm in the life sciences litigation group, but have had the opportunity to work on commercial and intellectual property litigation matters and even to advise clients on non-litigation issues," said Heather Ritch of Reed Smith.

Here, attorneys share tips for younger lawyers looking to gain an edge on the partnership track.

Learn How To Read Medical Records

Young product liability attorneys are often advised that they should learn a company's product inside and out, but the importance of learning how to read medical records is often overlooked, according to William P. Geraghty of Shook Hardy Bacon.

As a mid-level associate, Geraghty said that he once had the opportunity to work with a higher-ranking medical malpractice attorney, which entailed reading a number of doctors' records.

"I learned so much about medicine and the way doctors think," Geraghty said. "It proved to be extremely helpful to make that jump from doing research and writing to then starting to take depositions of plaintiffs about their medical history and things written in their records."

The prescribing doctor for a patient is often one of the most important witnesses in pharmaceutical cases, Geraghty noted, and understanding why he or she decided to prescribe a particular drug can give an attorney a leg up in taking a deposition of that doctor.

Do More Pro Bono Work

Attorneys recommended that associates seek out pro bono opportunities to sharpen their skills, exposing themselves to a wide array of circumstances that could add to their depth of experience.

Even if a pro bono case doesn't involve product liability work, it may offer the opportunity to present a case to a jury. As many product liability cases end up going to trial, young lawyers would benefit by soaking up all the jury experience they can get, attorneys said.

Heather Ritch, a partner in Reed Smith LLP's life sciences health industry group who has done pro bono work on behalf of homeowners in tangled title situations, said that such work affords the opportunity to learn the basic elements of one-on-one client advocacy.

"Doing pro bono work has offered me the opportunity to practice some fundamental lawyering skills — you have to understand the panoply of issues facing a particular client, define the particular scope of representation, come up with a plan for problem-solving and execute that plan," Ritch said.

Develop Your Own Style

Many younger lawyers tend to mimic or replicate the style of more senior attorneys in their firm, but at some point, they'll have to develop their own way of describing issues to a jury or taking depositions, Joseph J. Krasovec of Schiff Hardin LLP said.

"The sooner you can do that, the better presence you'll have because it's your natural self coming out ... in a way that tells the story of a case or presents the evidence of a case that is most advantageous to you," Krasovec said.

Over the years, Krasovec said he has worked with a number of excellent attorneys, and each one of them has their own approach to presenting in a courtroom or conducting mediations in a dispute resolution setting.

"Find what you're comfortable with and how you best communicate with others in a courtroom or in a mediation or in a trial," Krasovec said.

Leave Your Desk

Product liability work in particular necessitates work outside of the office, whether it's in a courtroom or traveling to take witness depositions, and the sooner that young product liability attorneys get used to getting out from behind their desks, the better, experts said.

"Like any other litigation, you have to work hard, roll up your sleeves and dig into the facts of a case," Krasovec said.

Younger attorneys can also raise their visibility in the field by not being shackled to their desks at all times.

"Get out of your office and your comfort zone — that includes shaking hands and meeting people," said Ritch. "Join a board and seek out speaking opportunities."

Keep Honing Your Skills

Product liability associates looking to make partner should ultimately keep pushing themselves and avoid the mistake of resting on their laurels, attorneys said.

“Don’t be afraid to fail — take on challenges, and don’t be afraid if it doesn’t go perfectly the first time,” Krasovec said.

For example, ask more senior lawyers to read over a deposition and give their critique of your strategy for the deposition — maybe there was a time when a different question would have been more effective, Krasovec said.

Young attorneys should also spend less time on tasks they have already mastered and more time expanding the top level of their skill set, Krasovec said, adding that “if you’ve done a lot of interrogatory responses, then take that next step to deposition.”

Young talent should also take a look around at their peers and strive to develop skills that set them apart from the crowd, Geraghty said.

“Maybe you’re really good at taking depositions or writing winning motions,” he said.

And most importantly, younger lawyers should keep working on both their writing and oral communication skills.

“That’s how you grab the attention of more senior lawyers,” Geraghty said.

--Editing by Philip Shea and Kelly Duncan.