

# Top Lawyers: Sandra M Radna On The 5 Things You Need To Become A Top Lawyer In Your Specific Field of Law

An Interview With Chere Estrin



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Knowledge in your practice area. The practice of law is called the “practice” because the law is always changing. Attorneys who keep up to date

with those changes will be leaders in their fields. This can be accomplished by taking continuing legal education courses, reading the paper and watching the news. If you are not aware of what is going on in the world around you, how will you be able to advise your clients? Our role as attorneys is to advise our clients. Basing advice on information that is not current can have devastating consequences.

**T**he legal field is known to be extremely competitive. Lawyers are often smart, ambitious, and highly educated. That being said, what does it take to stand out and become a “Top Lawyer” in your specific field of law? In this interview series called “5 Things You Need To Become A Top Lawyer In Your Specific Field of Law”, we are talking to top lawyers who share what it takes to excel and stand out in your industry.

*As a part of this interview series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Sandra M. Radna.*

*Sandra M. Radna, Esq. is the owner of Law Offices of Sandra M. Radna, PC., a general practice law firm based in Long Island, New York. With 28 years of experience practicing law, representing divorcees since 1993, Radna founded Law Offices of Sandra M. Radna in 2012 and now leads an all-women firm. Radna was selected as the top 1% of Family Lawyers by the National Institute of Trial Lawyers, and was also chosen as a Lawyer of Distinction in the areas of Divorce and Family Law as recognized by the New York Times and USA Today. She has been*

*interviewed by National Public Radio (NPR), The Donna Drake Show, and Wake Up Call Podcast, has been featured in Newsday, USA Today, and Long Island Business News- Print Edition, and is the author of You're Getting Divorced...Now What?, the ultimate divorce court guide.*

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dig in, our readers would love to get to know you a bit more. What is the “backstory” that brought you to this particular career path in Law? Did you want to be an attorney “when you grew up”?**

**O**nce I abandoned the idea of becoming a ballerina, (when I was 8 years old) I actually wanted to become a doctor. I was attracted to making a difference in people’s lives. However, I disliked the nitty gritty of actually working in a hospital, so I switched gears and went to law school. I loved law school, I found everything so interesting. My first job after law school was in a large medical malpractice defense firm where I mostly worked with the companies that insured hospitals and medical professionals. To satisfy my desire to work one on one with people, I started working at a general practice firm where in addition to medical malpractice, I learned to handle personal injury, real estate and divorce.

**Can you tell us a bit about the nature of your practice and what you focus on?**

My firm handles contested divorces, medical malpractice, personal injury, and residential real estate closings. The largest percentage of my practice is Family Law/Divorce. We handle the divorces where the parties do not agree about most things and the issues will likely be decided by a judge in court.

**You are a successful attorney. Which three-character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success?**

Optimism, enthusiasm and tenacity.

**What unique qualities do you have, that others may not?**

When I decide to do something, I stick with it until it happens.

### **Can you please share a story or example for each?**

After practicing law for only 2 years, I decided that I wanted to start my own firm. I convinced one of my friends from college to quit his job and join me. We were partners for 17 years. When I decided that I wanted to end the partnership and start a new firm, I did that. I started the new firm with just me and 1 assistant, I was confident that the firm would thrive and grow. My firm now consists of 14 people, 7 of which are attorneys. For years I thought about writing a book so that people would know what to expect in a contested divorce. I envisioned that the book would discuss divorce in a relatable, interesting and informative way. My book, *You're Getting Divorced...Now What?* was published and released at the end of 2020. It discusses what to expect in a divorce with relatable experience sharing from my clients, 12 copyrighted and fillable forms to help plan what is necessary during a divorce, and is as interesting and easy to read as a novel.

### **Do you think you have had luck in your success?**

This question makes me think of two quotes that I love: "Luck favors the prepared mind"-Louis Pasteur and "Luck is preparation meeting the moment of opportunity"-Oprah Winfrey. I have had a number of things happen that may seem "lucky" but were actually things that worked out because I prepared for them.

### **Can you explain what you mean?**

For example, I have hired a number of people on my staff at times when I was not planning on hiring. The first attorney I hired was the wife of someone that I knew from networking. When he asked me if I would hire his wife, I told him that I wasn't hiring attorneys at that point. To be polite I agreed to meet with her. Because I knew in my mind what I would want when I was ready to hire an attorney, once I met with her, I decided to hire her. I similarly hired another wife of someone I knew from networking as a paralegal after I had already decided to hire someone else, but had not yet offered that person the position. This paralegal has now become an integral part of my team. From employees, to finding the perfect office space, to having the time to write my book due to the pandemic, to meeting the right connection at the

right time, things seem to fall in place when they are supposed to because I am prepared for the opportunity when it arises.

**Do you think where you went to school has any bearing on your success? How important is it for a lawyer to go to a top-tier school?**

I did not go to a top tier law school. I went to Ohio Northern University in Ada, Ohio. However, I do believe that the education I received there had a bearing on my success. The education was excellent, and I believe that my knowledge of the law, issue spotting and litigation skills can be directly traced back to the foundation I was given, the quality of the education I was afforded and the skills that I learned in law school. That being said, I believe that if a lawyer attends a top-tier law school, the opportunities available for a career after graduation are much more plentiful and attainable. You can get the great job coming from a lesser regarded law school, but it takes more effort on the part of the student.

**Based on the lessons you have learned from your experience, if you could go back in time and speak to your twenty-year-old self, what would you say?**

I would tell my 20-year-old self not to stress about Organic Chemistry because I won't need to use it in the future anyway!

**Would you do anything differently?**

I would not do anything differently. Even though I was a pre-med biology major/psychology minor who did not take legal courses in college, I use a great deal of what I learned in pre-med, nursing school, my first job in the large medical malpractice defense firm, and my next job with the small firm in my work as a lawyer today.

**This is not easy work. What is your primary motivation and drive behind the work that you do?**

Without a doubt, it's the people that we help every day. They rely on us to help them through such difficult times in their lives. Helping them through successfully is the greatest reward.

**What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now?**

We have some divorces that we were successful in obtaining immediate emergency court intervention to prevent harm to our clients by their future former spouses; some interesting medical malpractice cases involving plastic surgery errors and we are helping a family of new American citizens purchase their first home.

**Where do you go from here? Where do you aim to be in the next chapter of your career?**

We have two new attorneys starting with the firm in the month of September and we are looking forward to continuing to grow and provide excellent service to our clients.

**Without sharing anything confidential, can you please share your most successful “war story”?**

I had a client whose husband was a citizen of another country with no ties to the U.S. He was a public figure in his country and very well connected to the government. The child had dual citizenship with that country and the U.S. My client was a U.S. Citizen with no ties to the husband’s country. Although one of the main issues of the divorce was my client’s concern that the husband would leave the country with the toddler and not return, the trial judge shockingly granted the husband’s request to go to his country with the child for a visit. I appealed the decision the very next day and was successful in the motion I brought to the Appellate court which prevented the husband from leaving the country with the child.

**Can you share the funniest?**

I once had a client who got married (not legally but had the ceremony and reception) to his new wife on the weekend between the first and second weeks of his divorce trial. Although the wife’s attorney was very upset, the judge was of the opinion that it was not a big deal since it was not yet a legal marriage and just instructed us to continue with the trial.

**Ok, fantastic. Let’s now shift to discussing some advice for aspiring lawyers. Do you work remotely? Onsite? Or Hybrid? What do you think**

**will be the future of how law offices operate? What do you prefer? Can you please explain what you mean?**

Like everyone else, when the pandemic first shut everything down in New York in March of 2020, my entire office began working remotely. My office has been working onsite since August of 2020 with the exception of 2 employees who work primarily from home and one employee who is hybrid. I think that while the manner in which each particular law firm operates will be as unique as that firm, the pandemic has changed the practice of law for good (both literally and figuratively). While an attorney or law firm employee working from home was rare and possibly even thought of as a last resort by many law firm owners (including me), working remotely during the pandemic has demonstrated that employees can be as efficient, or in some instances, more efficient, while working remotely. I think that quality of life is an important component of any job, including law. Having the choice of working from home, on occasion, or on a regular basis will become, in my opinion, part of most employment packages and the future of how most law firms will operate. I prefer working onsite. Problem solving, which is what we as lawyers do, works best as a collaborative process. It is easier to share ideas and work through issues in person, even though it is possible to do remotely. I also love the energy of having everyone in the office. The off-the-cuff discussions and laughter happen more often in person and make the day very enjoyable.

**How has the legal world changed since COVID?**

The biggest change has been the transition to virtual court appearances. In New York, the first remote virtual court appearances commenced weeks after the March 2020 shut down. First by phone, then by Skype for Business and currently via Microsoft Teams. It has been amazing. It is efficient, issues are being addressed and it is evolving every day. I am very impressed with how New York's Chief Judge, Janet DiFiore, has handled the transition of the court system to a virtual platform.

**How do you think it might change in the near future? Can you explain what you mean?**

I believe that it will be similar to what we have now. We are more than one year past the initial pandemic shutdown. Since many of the judges are now in the courthouse,



we have a hybrid of both virtual and in-person court appearances. For routine status conferences, attorneys have the choice to appear virtually or in person. For conferences, that require some type of judicial intervention, such as removal of a child due to neglect of a parent, the court will likely require the attorneys and their clients to appear in person. Even though some trials are taking place virtually, I think in the future they will be in person. It is difficult to determine the credibility of a witness who is testifying virtually when they are able to read from their computer screen and be coached about what to say by someone who is offscreen without the judge or the other attorneys or parties being aware.

**We often hear about the importance of networking and getting referrals. Is this still true today?**

Absolutely! I like to replace the term “networking” with “relationship building”. I wrote a chapter about it a few years ago in a book called *Running Your Own Business* by Kizzi Nkwocha. Networking/relationship building is one of the most powerful ways to increase your client base and grow your business. The first client in most businesses was likely referred by a family member, or friend, or someone who was recommended by a family member or friend. They were part of the business owner’s “network”, hence the term “networking”. I like to call “networking” “relationship building” because it is rare to receive a business referral from someone after the first meeting. The ‘magic’ happens after multiple enjoyable meetings with the same person. With each meeting, a deeper understanding of each other’s respective businesses develops, and referrals follow.

**Has the nature of networking changed or has its importance changed? Can you explain what you mean?**

Like everything else, the nature of networking changed because much of it has become virtual. Although the ability to meet in person, due to the pandemic, initially “forced” many of us into virtual networking, I believe that now, most of us embrace the technology and the doors it has opened. Where in person networking/relationship building in your local venue is wonderful, virtual networking eliminates travel time, permits meetings in remote venues, and provides the opportunity for a greater number of meetings. Through virtual networking, I have met people from across the country and many more people than I would have been able to meet in person. The

relevance and importance of networking has been enhanced by the virtual platform. The relationships that we build virtually are the foundation for future business and an amazing prelude to that first in person meeting.

### **Based on your experience, how can attorneys effectively leverage social media to build their practice?**

In my experience, providing a mix of helpful information within your practice areas, information about yourself and your team, successes that you have achieved for your clients as well as fun posts and posts about current events, help keep your firm top of mind so that when someone needs an attorney in your practice areas, they think of you.

### **Excellent. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your “5 Things You Need to Become a Top Lawyer in Your Specific Field of Law?” Please share a story or an example for each.**

- 1. Knowledge in your practice area.** The practice of law is called the “practice” because the law is always changing. Attorneys who keep up to date with those changes will be leaders in their fields. This can be accomplished by taking continuing legal education courses, reading the paper and watching the news. If you are not aware of what is going on in the world around you, how will you be able to advise your clients? Our role as attorneys is to advise our clients. Basing advice on information that is not current can have devastating consequences. For example, during the pandemic the rules for how to file papers in court, communicate with the court, and seek relief/remedies for our clients has changed many times. Attorneys who do not keep up with the changes cost their clients valuable time and money. If you pay attention and give up to the minute, correct advice to your clients, you will rise to the top of your field.
- 2. Get involved:** If you would like to become a top lawyer in your field, people have to know who you are. My husband has an expression, “It’s not who you know, it’s who knows you”. If you are a young attorney, **joining your local bar association** is a great way to get to know other attorneys in your field as well as the judges in your practice area. Building relationships with other attorneys and judges is extremely helpful when negotiating on behalf of your client. **Volunteer**

**with a charity** you believe in and become a member of their Board of Directors or volunteer and sponsor events in your community. In addition to the wonderful feeling you will have because you are helping others, more people in your community will get to know you. **Join a networking group**, or a number of networking groups. That is the best way for people in the business community to get to know you.

3. **Read as much as you can** about your practice area, relationship building, and self-improvement. Reading makes you a better speaker and a better writer, two of the most important attributes of a successful attorney. Reading also builds confidence. The books that I think every attorney should read are: *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, *Give to Get* by Adam Grant, *Never Eat Alone* by Keith Ferrazzi, *How to be a Power Connector* by Judy Robinett, and *The One Thing* by Gary W. Keller.
4. **Establish core values** for yourself if you are working for a company and for your team if you have your own business. Establishing core values gives you a “code of conduct” by which to live your business life. It provides consistency and predictability. Gino Wickman’s book *Traction* gives you a step-by-step roadmap to creating your core business values. My business established our core values and has been utilizing the Entrepreneurial Operating System explained in *Traction* for years, with great success. When you start practicing your area of law while implementing your core values, everything changes for the better.
5. **Have processes in place.** One way to ensure that your clients have a consistent, good experience every time, is to have processes in place. Processes ensure that your client’s case is handled the same way that you would handle it, even if a member of your team is handling it on behalf of your firm. A good book to read that will help you put processes in place is *The E-Myth Revisited* by Donald Gerber. It reads like a novel and provides a clear method for establishing business processes.

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might see this. :-)**

I would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with Oprah Winfrey. She has influenced my life in so many ways. I just graduated from college when her show debuted. What started out as an entertaining show, evolved into a show that taught us daily lessons. I quote Oprah pretty often (as I did in this interview). My favorite things that Oprah told me (through her shows, and on YouTube) are: When someone shows you their true colors, believe them...the first time; We humans have instincts, just like animals, we just ignore them; The most important prayer you can say every day is “thank you”; and my favorite: When something isn’t going your way, it’s the universe telling you to go in a different direction.

I would love to meet Oprah and thank her for the dramatic influence she has had on my life and have a casual conversation with her about life in general. Thank you for this question. It’s so fun to dream. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you and share my insights.

**This was very inspiring. Thank you so much for the time you spent with this. We wish you continued success and good health!**

Business

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