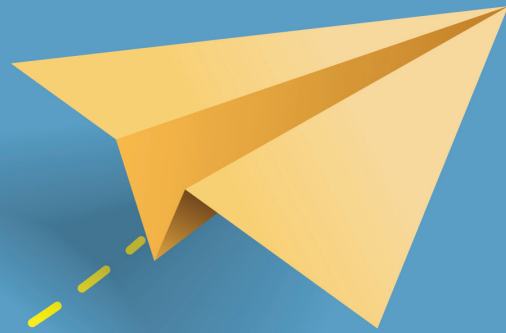


How Choosing a **NICHE** Can Improve Your Practice (and Your Life)



Back in 2012, I was managing litigation for Hartford Steam Boiler. I was pushing 10 years in practice at that point, with two previous roles litigating at Shipman & Goodwin and Bingham McCutchen. My wife, Kristen Marcroft, graduated from law school that year—she was a non-traditional student—and she wasn't drawn to the conventional career path that I'd taken back when I graduated in my 20s. That, combined with some fatigue of the (initially very rewarding) extensive travel required by my in-house position and a real desire for a new professional adventure, led to my resigning from my corporate role to open the firm that's now Freed Marcroft together with Kristen and another partner.

BY
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Choosing a Niche

In the first couple of years, Freed Marcroft was essentially a small general civil practice. We wore way more hats each day than just “lawyer”—including bookkeeper, receptionist, paralegal, marketing assistant, custodian—you get the picture. Although our independence was rewarding, we were also stuck in the weeds. By 2014, we realized that we needed help learning how to make Freed Marcroft a place where the two of us could focus our time on giving clients an exceptional experience. We scheduled an initial call with a coaching firm, “How to Manage a Small Law Firm.” I do not overstate it when I say that we walked away from that first conversation with the single most transformational piece of practice management advice we’ve ever received: “Limit your practice.”

We have had significant growth since that day—Freed Marcroft is currently a team of 15 plus—but the most critical decision we made was back in 2014 when we decided to pick a niche and throw everything we had at it. That was the key that unlocked everything that followed.



How to Pick Your Niche

The fateful question that the coach asked us was, “If you could pick just one practice area, what would it be?”

It’s your immediate, gut response to that question that has the potential to help you build a practice you truly love. For Kristen and me, the answer was family law—we said it in unison. For you the answer might be personal injury or trust and estates or bankruptcy or criminal or tax—it doesn’t matter what it is, it only matters that it matters to *you*. To be clear, our choice of matrimonial law wasn’t based on anything objective. We didn’t know how many divorces there were in Connecticut that year, or how much competition existed, or have any sense of the margins on family law. People in the divorce transition were just the people we were called to help. That was the work we wanted to do.

Find a niche that provides you with purpose and meaning. Don’t make the mistake of picking a practice area based largely upon what work you have the most of, or what others think, or what appears profitable. Reflect on the kind of law you enjoy practicing, the clients you love helping, and what truly gives you meaning at the end of the day, and choose a focus based on those factors.



Making the Shift to One Practice Area

With our coach’s guidance, we began winding down our other practice areas. I’m not going to try to tell you it wasn’t scary, because it was incredibly scary. Frankly, back then the idea of losing any income was downright petrifying. When your life partner is also your law partner, your firm is your family’s sole source of income. At the time, we were also responsible for 100 percent of our one employee’s household income. Turning away any business we could competently serve seemed bananas. But two things made us keep going. First, we were simply eager to have an exclusively divorce and family law practice. Second, the way we

had been managing our practice wasn’t working. We’d had the same stress (way too much) and the same revenues (way too little) for our firm’s entire existence. We held our noses and took the plunge.

One of the reasons we were successful is that we had professional help. When you niche down, make sure you hire someone with the experience to help you structure how to ease out of the practice areas you’re dropping and how to ramp up your marketing and systems to support your new single focus. This isn’t the time to be penny wise and pound foolish. You should not go it alone, and you should not try to use free articles from the Internet as a substitute for a coach.



Pick One Thing and Do It Really, Really Well

Today, everything at Freed Marcroft is focused on divorce and family law. Everything. Our blog and videos educate clients on divorce and family law. Every book and research tool in our office is about divorce and family law. Aspects of divorce and family law are the subject of all our CLEs, and each of our lawyers benefits from membership in the CBA’s Family Law Section and other divorce-centered legal organizations. Our paralegals aren’t trying to witness a will or prepare closing docs while they draft a client’s financial affidavit; they are focused on family law practice and how to help family law clients. Our lawyers appear in every family court in Connecticut. We know the judges, the clerks, the rules, the latest caselaw, and our colleagues in the family law bar.

Because our practice area is an inch wide, our lawyers’ experience runs a mile deep. Since limiting our practice, Freed Marcroft has developed an extensive international and interstate practice and regularly takes high complexity financial and custody cases to trial. We are trained and experienced in all divorce modalities—mediation, collaborative law, and both high and low-conflict litigation—enabling us to assist clients in whatever approach is the best fit for their circumstances and goals.

All our practice management systems are created for family law clients and practice. Because we are trying to do just one thing really, really well, we have been able to thoughtfully design our firm in a way that delivers not only in-depth legal knowledge and skills, but also a client experience rooted in the unique emotional and financial realities of divorce and family matters.



The Benefits to Attorneys

While the idea of a narrow focus might seem limited compared to the broader approach of either small general practice firms or Big Law firms like where I began my career, a tight focus offers several benefits to lawyers. First, it permits lawyers to practice the law that inspires them. Second, it provides the freedom to build or expand expertise. Finally, it allows attorneys to focus on designing and delivering exceptional client experiences.

Senior attorneys spend their time on sophisticated work, including complicated facts and complex legal issues. Rather than jacks of all trades, they are masters of one. Lawyers are happier, less stressed, and more efficient. As the firm grows, senior lawyers mentor junior lawyers in how to develop the strategy of a case, effectuate that strategy, and serve not only as a client's attorney but also her counselor at law. Additionally, a team of lawyers devoted to one practice area allows for cross-pollination and brainstorming. At Freed Marcroft, we call on each other's collective knowledge, expertise, and experience to help our clients daily. Clients and professionals alike benefit from our hivemind.

For junior attorneys who are passionate about becoming exceptional in a certain area of the law, working at a boutique law firm in that niche can bring great training, satisfaction, and opportunities to develop and grow their career. For example, while Freed Marcroft provides structured onboarding for all our attorneys, our training program is more intense and extended for junior attorneys. We created our Divorce College to teach junior attorneys divorce and family law and practice. Its curriculum includes everything from one-on-ones, homework, moot court, role-playing, and a Divorce Lab. As junior lawyers' experience increases, their training is further tailored to them and their specific professional development needs and goals.

The Benefits to Law Firm Owners

In addition to all the above benefits, law firm owners who select and embrace a niche have the opportunity to run a more agile, entrepreneurial business. You get to create a focused legal practice in your vision.

If growing your law firm is one of your goals, and you niche down deliberately and successfully, your firm will flourish. Freed Marcroft's gross revenues increased about 700 percent between when we decided to transition to family law exclusively and today. We have eight lawyers instead of two lawyers, and a team that big again to support them. Rather than being a source of stress, referring out potential clients that have a legal need other than divorce and family law is an opportunity. We help the potential client by getting them to a lawyer experienced in the relevant practice area who can do an excellent job on their behalf. And, we get to build rewarding relationships and strong referral connections with attorneys across the Connecticut bar.

As Freed Marcroft's owners, two things stand out to Kristen and me as the most exciting and rewarding benefits of our growth: the team of people we now get to work with, and the number of clients we now get to help in the way we get to help them.

I'm often asked why we grew by narrowing our niche. To many lawyers it seems counterintuitive that limiting your clients grows your practice. There are a lot of reasons, but you can boil it down to two. First, all our marketing is streamlined and focused on attracting exactly the type of clients we are best able to help. The

message is clear, the mission is focused, and all energy and dollars go in that direction. Second, similarly, our attorneys are freed up to focus on understanding and accomplishing each client's goals. In other words, clients are happier.

The Benefits to Clients

Benefits to lawyers translate into benefits to clients, and benefits to clients translate into benefits to lawyers. The two are inextricably linked.

Lawyers who limit their practice to one area they love can focus on delivering personalized, efficient, client-centered service to the clients that they can help best. In our experience at Freed Marcroft, it's clear more and more clients want to connect with their lawyers in an open, authentic way and in a comfortable, welcoming environment. A boutique practice can encourage that type of connection while offering clients high-quality service based on significant accumulated experience.

And there are just no two ways about it: happy, confident lawyers do better work. ■

Meghan Freed is managing co-partner of Freed Marcroft, a Connecticut law firm that devotes its practice exclusively to divorce and family law.



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