

US Law Week

Latin Sayings Hold Practical Tips for Legal Business Development

June 13, 2025, 4:30 AM EDT

Paul Manuele says that law firm leaders can apply wisdom from several Latin phrases to grow their practices more effectively.

Latin is the second language of the legal profession. Amicus curiae. Prima facie. Pro bono. Lawyers use these phrases every day in briefs, courtrooms, contracts, and conversations. But did you know that business development has its own set of Latin phrases? You won't find them in Black's Law Dictionary, but they capture timeless truths about how lawyers communicate, position themselves, and grow their practices.

What follows is a curated collection of Latin phrases that can help law firm leaders rethink age-old problems—such as delayed decision-making, diluted messaging, and divided attention—and market their firms more effectively. These aren't just catchy phrases; they're distilled insights from some of the greatest minds in history whose wisdom is as relevant as ever.

Periculum in mora: Danger in delay

Source: Livy (59 BCE–17 CE), Ab Urbe Condita

European lawyers will recognize this phrase as one of two conditions for obtaining a protective order or injunction; the other is *fumus boni iuris*, meaning “likelihood of success on the merit of the case.”

In business development, this means, among other things, that if you get sign-off on a client alert at 4 p.m. Friday, don't wait until Monday morning to send it, even if you've been told that readership will be higher then. Send it immediately.

I have reviewed analytics on many email campaigns, and seen little correlation between the timing of email campaigns—whether the time of day or the day of the week—and readership. Not convinced? Try this thought experiment: If your client receives alerts from three of your competitors on Friday evening and yours on Monday morning, does it matter how high your readership is?

Principiis obsta: Resist the beginnings

Source: Ovid (43 BCE–17/18 CE), Remedia Amoris

In modern parlance, “nip it in the bud.” Spot problems and address them early, before they become unmanageable. If you notice subtle changes in a client's behavior, such as shorter email responses (or no responses) or decreased availability, don't brush them aside. It could mean your client is just busier than usual, but it also could indicate dissatisfaction.

Hoping for the best isn't a strategy. Addressing a potential issue proactively and head-on, even if it turns out to be nothing, shows the client that you care. Indeed, some of the strongest client relationships are forged through moments like these. A partner's willingness to tackle an uncomfortable conversation not only prevents small concerns from festering but also can deepen trust and strengthen the relationship.

Multum non multa: Much, not many

Source: Pliny the Younger (c. 61–c. 113 CE), Epistulae, “A letter from Pliny the Younger to Fuscus,” in which he advised a friend that it was better to read a few books deeply than many superficially

This phrase shares DNA with the modern 80/20 rule, or Pareto Principle, which says that 80% of outcomes stem from 20% of causes. In a business development context, that often means 80% of revenue comes from 20% of clients. This is the rationale behind client teams, which enable firms to concentrate investment in the small number of clients who generate the most revenue—and where the probability of securing new business is highest.

On the marketing side, this means focusing on the firm's core practices, not promoting everything equally. In many firms, that's difficult to do. Decentralized decision-making and the democratizing effects of social media make it possible for lawyers from non-core practices to dominate the firm's public image simply by producing more content.

That dynamic creates a distorted image of the firm, one that can confuse clients and recruits and damage the brand. Marketers must raise the issue with leadership and recommend clear promotion policies.

Nulla dies sine linea: No day without a line

Source: Pliny the Elder (c. 23/24–79 CE), Naturalis Historia 35.84, on the painter Apelles, who practiced daily

If you want to do something and do it well, do it every day. Repetition builds habit, which makes it more likely you'll do it, and practice leads to improvement.

The more often you reach out to clients, write follow-ups, or start conversations, the easier and more natural it becomes. So set aside 10 minutes a day for business development. If that's not enough time to finish what you started, that's fine. Come back to it tomorrow. The key is consistency. Make a phone call. Schedule a lunch. Send a follow-up. Just do something every day.

Age quod agis: Do what you are doing

Source: Attributed to Pope Gregory I, also known as St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604 CE)

This medieval phrase bridges the ancient world and our modern one. It's also arguably the most fundamental principle on this list. In today's workplace, distraction is pervasive and problematic.

We check phones during meetings, interrupt conversations to reply to emails, and mistake our divided attention for efficiency. Especially in law firms, where time equals money, multitasking can become a performance—a way of showing that your attention is in high demand.

But efficiency and excellence require focus. In a profession with high expectations and fierce competition, the ability to bring full attention to the task at hand often is what separates those who succeed from those who struggle to keep up.

The importance of focus is central not only to a successful career but also to a fulfilling life. So, whether you're sitting in a meeting or at the family dinner table, put the phone away. Be fully present. Age quod agis.

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