



## You Need to Be in Favor with the Right People

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I started my first company, back in 2000, I and the other people who were with me at the time sat down and had a three-day meeting during which we discussed what we wanted the company to be then and what we wanted it to become. It was an incredible meeting that I will remember forever. During those three days, we came up with this fundamental core value, which has since shaped the course of my life and my various companies: *We Must Get People Jobs*. This has driven all of our work since that time, and anytime we have seen limitations in any certain way of doing things, we have always come back to this core value and expanded upon it. Today, because of this core value, we have evolved into numerous businesses that are connected to this same ideology.

Back in 2001, I started a company called [Legal Authority](#) to help law students and attorneys get jobs. I had been a law professor, and I noticed that many people were having an extraordinarily difficult time getting jobs after graduating. The main reason they were having a difficult time was that they were "undermarketing" themselves. Most law schools at the time, including the one where I taught, had only a small list of law firms, public interest organizations, government offices, companies, and so forth that they made available to their students to apply to.

To my mind, this did not make any sense. In a city such as Los Angeles, for instance, there are more than 10,000 employers that hire attorneys. Conversely, the average law school might keep a list of only 200 employers for their students to apply to. Because everyone was applying to the same employers, it was more difficult to get jobs. Getting on the law schools' *list* often was a political game whereby the law schools would steer their very best students to certain employers and not others. I figured that by creating *giant lists* of employers that students could apply to, I would make it much easier for them to [find jobs](#).

As part of the service, I would put together a comprehensive list of prospective employers, rewrite their résumés and cover letters, and print all the materials that would be mailed out to employers. In some cases, people might mail out more than 500 letters; they would always be marketing themselves to a much wider variety of employers than their law schools would be providing them with. More important, they would be marketing themselves to employers that other law students were not marketing themselves to (i.e., employers not on the law school's preferred list of employers), and since they were often the only person seeking a job at a given employer from a given law school, they would really stand out.

Just as I had anticipated, the process worked like magic. The law students we assisted ended up getting jobs--time and time again. I then opened the service to attorneys, and soon people who had been unemployed for weeks or months started getting job offers. The service grew like crazy, and within a few months, I had a crew of at least 20 people researching employers, several people [writing resumes](#), and people printing résumés and cover letters. The operation became so big, I needed to move offices. In a short time we had become overwhelmed with job seekers using our services. It was a very funny and exciting time in the business.

Because the service did more than the law school career services offices, and was so much more effective, I started running full-page advertisements in law student magazines that said things like: "LEGAL AUTHORITY CAN BE MORE EFFECTIVE THAN YOUR LAW SCHOOL CAREER SERVICES OFFICE!" I ran these advertisements not because I had a problem with law school career services offices, but because what I was saying was simply true. The company really did do more for law students than a career services office--in fact, in terms of marketing, it did a lot more.

The service also took off when we started dealing with attorneys, because the process worked just as well for them as it had for law students. In the job search realm, there are many legal recruiters out there who track down and place [attorneys in law firms](#) and other organizations. However, legal recruiters typically only work with the largest and most prestigious law firms--perhaps the top 2%-3% from all firms. The reason for this is that recruiters usually charge a fee to the employer, which is 25% over and above the attorney's annual salary. Only the best attorneys can work with recruiters, since law firms are only willing to pay these fees for the most extraordinary attorneys. The problem therefore is that attorneys are only able to get jobs through recruiters if they are amongst the elite of the elite; this leaves the rest of the attorneys to figure out how to get jobs on their own.

The attorneys who used Legal Authority found incredible fortune using our service. They were able to secure jobs after being unemployed, and in most cases, Legal Authority proved to be a far more effective way for them to get jobs than by using a recruiting firm. Recruiters would never openly admit this to an attorney because it would reveal their weakness--but it was true in almost every case. The reasons for this were (1) the attorney would be able to cover the entire market, and (2) there was no fee attached to their candidacy. Law firms are happy to pay fees to recruiters for the most exceptional attorneys (and, indeed, almost expect them to be using recruiter), but 95% of the attorneys out there would actually be ignored or overlooked by a firm, even if they did come by way of a recruiter.

To publicize this fact, I started running advertisements for Legal Authority in all sorts of magazines and other publications, explaining how it was more effective than using a recruiter. With these advertisements, the business continued to grow. Within a year of starting the company, the company had more than 50 employees. We have since started another company called [EmploymentAuthority.com](#), which does the same thing for people who are in other professions outside of law.

Around the same time, I was making a name for myself as a [legal recruiter](#). I started getting invitations to speak to the student bodies of various law schools about the job market. I was not known by law schools or anyone for my involvement with Legal Authority, but I was known as a recruiter. When I would go into the law schools, I would be introduced and would start talking about the legal job market and then segue into a talk about Legal Authority and how it was an incredibly effective way for law students to get jobs. I remember after one speech, the Career Services Dean of one law school walked up to me and said something I could not believe:

[pullquote]If I had known you were behind Legal Authority, I would not have invited you to speak.[/pullquote]

*"If I had known you were behind Legal Authority, I would not have invited you to speak."*

I was puzzled by this statement, and the woman seemed very angry. I lingered at the cocktail reception afterward and then asked someone else in the career services office why the Dean disliked Legal Authority so much. She told me that my magazine ads had offended all of the career services people because the advertisements had attacked the effectiveness of career services offices. The more I tried to reach out to career services offices, the more hostile they became.

Within a year or so of this particular incident, I started getting letters and phone calls from the National Association of Legal Search Consultants (NALSC). They threatened to revoke the membership of a separate recruiting company I worked for if I did not remove from the Legal Authority website information about how Legal Authority worked as compared to recruiters. At their demands and due to their threats, we removed articles and other materials from Legal Authority, all of which explained in one way or another that recruiters could only place the best attorneys and only could place them at the select few law firms that were willing to pay 25% in fees to the recruiting firm.

My relationship with this particular group became one of never-ending troubles and aggravation, as they looked into our various companies and started objecting to one thing after another (even in businesses not involving recruiting). Their objections to Legal Authority and our other job search businesses in the legal community grew so pronounced that we eventually told the organization we wanted nothing more to do with them. Our core value of getting attorneys jobs was in direct conflict with what appeared to be their core value of protecting the legal recruiting industry from businesses that might be viewed as competitive. Apparently, several years ago one of the Founders of NALSC was kicked out of the organization for starting a job site for attorneys. Associations exist to protect the members' interests, although in my opinion there is nothing wrong with two sides having opposing views. I have no animosity toward the organization, nor any regrets about the success of Legal Authority.

As Legal Authority continued to grow, our core value of [getting attorneys jobs](#) expanded into other businesses. The second business we started was a job site, LawCrossing.com. The way most job sites work is that they charge employers a fee, typically \$350 to \$500 to put a job on their websites. While this is a good business model, this also unfortunately ends up keeping lots of jobs off of the site, because not all employers are willing to pay these fees. My idea was to gather employment listings from every job site, plus the [legal jobs](#) that were available on LawCrossing.com. Also, many employers list jobs directly on their own websites. I decided that it would also be a good idea to collect the job listings from these websites and put them on LawCrossing.com as well. We launched this business and it quickly became very popular. It was based on the core value of getting people jobs. We have always looked at how people get jobs, and if there are ever deficiencies in the system, the goal has been to correct these deficiencies.

As LawCrossing's position in the market strengthened, I was enthusiastic and wanted to reach out to law schools and tell them about it. I figured that they would be incredibly happy that such a site existed, and I wanted to give the service to law students and others for free. Several years ago, I decided that a good thing to do would be to send one of our employees on a cross-country trip to visit every US law school. I purchased a giant Dodge Sprinter van and had all sorts of graphics put on the side of it promoting the business, [LawCrossing](#). We had a sign on the back of the van that said "WE LOVE ATTORNEYS AND LAW STUDENTS." I was incredibly excited about the business and loved our customers.

I hired an old Mormon man in his late 60s, from rural Utah, to travel across the country in the van. He was enthusiastic about making the trip in numerous respects, and he seemed to be the perfect person for the job. However, within a few weeks of his hitting the road, when he reached states like Kentucky and others, we started to get crazy e-mails and messages from various law schools. They sent us messages stating that it was "sick" to have a man traveling across the United States in a van promoting sex with law students. I realized this is hard to believe; however, to my astonishment, many of the law schools decided to interpret the message on the truck in a negative way, rather than a positive way. The furor among the law schools about the so-called "love truck" got so out of hand that I had to pull the entire tour. Everything the tour represented had been grossly misinterpreted by the law schools. I can assure you that no "funny business" was going on in this van.

In thinking about these episodes with Legal Authority and LawCrossing, with the career services offices and with the recruiting association, a consistent theme comes to mind for me: Influencers and Opinion Leaders were not consulted and assuaged in the process of launching these businesses. Instead, both of my businesses pronounced deficiencies in the system and made those in charge of the deficiencies a marketing target. Law school career services offices were targeted because they only gave students access to a limited number of employers. Recruiters were targeted because they could only give people access to a limited number of employers. In both cases, the other parties were guilty of intentionally controlling access to information. However, for both of these groups, information was the source of their power. My targeting this power was a major threat.

In reflecting on this situation, I can definitely say that I made some big mistakes with the recruiting association and the career services offices. Despite their deficiencies, targeting them was a fundamental mistake because the public's reaction to a business, or person, is generally shaped by opinion leaders--people who influence the opinions of the public. Recruiters influence the opinions of attorneys because they are talking to attorneys every day. Career services deans in law schools influence the opinions of law students because they are talking to law students every day. Targeting these people of leadership and authority in my marketing campaign was a massive mistake. In every business and endeavor, one of the most important things you can do is get on the good side of the people who influence others' opinions.

Politicians typically come to power because they have gained the influence of those who influence the opinions of others. For example, presidents typically are sponsored by important influencers in business. It is no secret that Hollywood stars, for example, use their power to influence elections. Several years ago, I was in the [student loan business](#) and one day someone in power in a major bank asked me to give a decent sum of money to a United States congressman. I did it. I proceeded to have lunch with the congressman a short time later, and from then on I regularly received calls from his office asking if I needed any help on Capitol Hill with various things. I was very surprised by this, but this is how politics works. Politicians seek the favor of people willing to support them and then find themselves committed to those special interests.

One reason that politicians lose power when they are in office is their inability to gain the favor of other leaders who have the power to influence others. Watching politics is fascinating because what you generally see are politicians making crazy decisions and pushing through insane legislation; it is more due to appeasing special interests and others in power than the general populace they purport to represent. The best businesspeople, the best politicians, and the best leaders in any profession who gain and hold on to power know that they have to influence people who are in a position to control the

opinions of others.

Something that really interested me was the resignation of Sarah Palin as the governor of Alaska. Here was a person who was extremely popular, at one point becoming a vice presidential candidate--and then several months later she resigns from her position, possibly dooming her political career forever. Most of the news stories I have watched and read have indicated that she may have resigned because the criticism against her became too much for her to personally handle. As she got into the public spotlight, she began to face enormous criticism for everything from how she dressed, to how her children behaved, and more. The criticism she faced became almost unrelenting. The opinion leaders and people in power attacked Palin and were able to make their opinions predominant. Without the support of the public, it became impossible for her to continue to govern.

People who control others' opinions are everywhere. For example, they exist in families. There are people inside families who have the ability to influence everyone else's opinions. This person could be a small child who turns against a parent, planting the seeds that empower the mother to leave the father, and causing other relatives to turn on the family. Similarly, people with strong and influential opinions exist within companies and organizations, and they are not always the people with the most money, or the best title.

What does all of this mean for your life and career? Unfortunately, it means that it is important to cater to and get the approval of people who have the ability to influence the opinions of others one way or another. These people are everywhere. Politicians rely upon them. Astute businesspeople rely upon them. Social climbers rely upon them. These people have an ability to control what happens in your career.

In my case, I have made mistakes by not catering more closely to people with the power to influence others. When you go against influential people, they can turn against you and make your career and life much more difficult. Often the person who gets fired, fails to get a promotion, and fails to ever get ahead is guilty of not impressing--*or even offending*--the people who have the ability to influence others. Believe it or not, this can be even more detrimental than doing poor work.

All around you there are countless political games at play, as people attempt to influence others with power and control others' opinions. In Hollywood, for example, I have heard some incredible stories that are demonstrative of this: I know of male movie stars whom the public thinks are heterosexual, who slept their way to the top--by having sex with much older men who are producers or another position of power. There seems to be no limit to the lengths people have gone in order to get to the top in their profession--but this is all around us and it is part of the game. You do not need to sleep with people to get to the top, but you do need to be aware of the game going on and you do need to play it, or at least play along with it to get ahead. My career advice is that you need to do your best to be in favor with the right people.

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