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## LPD Women Rainmakers Making It Rain Column: Bryna Dahlin

BY MICHELE POWERS, ESQ. ON OCTOBER 5, 2022 ·



**Bryna Dahlin** is a partner with Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff LLP who is widely known for effectively navigating the cutting-edge legal issues present in the fast-growing cannabis industry. Bryna's clients range from growers, distributors, product manufacturers and ancillary businesses to traditional companies who work with and are impacted by cannabis laws.

Bryna advises on issues of regulatory compliance; risk avoidance; company formation; contracts and licensing; corporate transactions; advertising and product packaging; brand strategy and intellectual property protection. She also performs legal due diligence for investors in the cannabis space and guides hemp, health and beauty brand clients in navigating CBD and FDA laws.

Bryna is also a skilled trial lawyer who has represented clients in an array of high-profile, "bet the company" cases in trial and appellate court. Past representations include prominent food, pharmaceutical, entertainment, advertising, technology, and consumer product companies.

**Michele Powers (MP): What led you to leave a successful litigation practice and change course into a new practice area in the cannabis industry?**

**Bryna Dahlin (BD):** Honestly, I was feeling burnt out. I was a partner at a large firm and had a successful 15-year litigation practice. But I did not see myself doing that work for the rest of my career.



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Litigation is negative by its very nature, which weighed on me. And the time demands are relentless. Even when I was supposed to be at home with my family and my kids my brain was always on my cases. I was waking up in the middle of the night thinking about work every night. The litigation track was not working for me. My husband agreed. He had been wanting me to change career tracks for a long time.

I made the decision first that I wanted to be doing something else. I still wanted to bring in an income, which meant I was still going to be a lawyer of some sort, since that's what I'm trained to do. I asked myself, "What can I do here that would be more meaningful to me?"

In looking through my possible options, I decided to take a gamble on the cannabis industry. My whole adult life I believed cannabis should never have been criminalized. It was banned in the 1930s as part of the country's demonization of Mexican immigrants and those in the jazz scene, who were by and large Black. It was made a Schedule I drug in the 1970s as part of Nixon's crusade against his so-called enemies, making it more "dangerous" than cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl, even though Nixon's own commission recommended that cannabis be regulated like alcohol.

The federal ban on cannabis has ruined countless lives. People have gone to jail, which affects not just them but their family and their future generations, and the laws are not fairly applied at all. On top of that, major medical benefits are coming to light, and the medical uses will continue to grow as we are allowed to study it more.

So, I was all in on supporting this industry. I feel good about it.

When I began in 2015, cannabis was still nascent in Illinois. It was just starting to come online on the medical side where I am based in Chicago. It seemed like a really good time to declare myself as an attorney for the industry.

#### **MP: What was your biggest challenge in making the switch to a new industry?**

**BD:** The biggest challenge was that it was frankly scary starting from zero. Pulling the trigger and making the jump was the big moment that got me committed. I had nothing. I quit my job. My law firm did not support work in the cannabis industry, and many do not to this day and will not until there is federal legalization.

So, I quit. I had the luxury to be able to make that choice, which I am grateful for.

If I were a single mom, I wouldn't have been able to do that. My husband is also a lawyer. Things were a challenge for us but doable. My first client was a startup that couldn't pay me. I took equity, which is not something I could do now that I am back at a larger firm. But at the time, because I had my own practice, I was able to take equity and it actually worked out quite well.

#### **MP: What obstacles did you overcome in building your brand and book of business from scratch?**

**BD:** As I mentioned, I started with one client with whom I took equity. I was not bringing in an income, and I began to put myself out there. I knew this is what I wanted to be doing. I connected with another woman who was in a very similar situation. She had left her firm and had one big client. At the beginning, it was just the two of us. We taught a law school course at Kent Law School, which was great and gave us some nice visibility. I also began speaking and attending conferences.

I had to be patient and stay the course. To trust in the process and just keep putting myself out there. Soon after I got my first client, I got another and another. In the beginning, I was also taking on some clients that were not cannabis related, just to get some income.

By my second year, all my clients were in cannabis, because I was getting referrals from people who worked with me. Clients were continually referring new clients to me, which motivated me to double down. By my second year I knew that it was working. At that point, I felt relief. Because no matter where you are, what

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firm you are with, if you have your own business, you are in control. My practice really grew from there, and it's been seven years now.

**MP: Now you are back at a large firm, Benesch, how did that come about?**

**BD:** Yes, I did come back to a larger firm, which I honestly did not think I was going to do in the beginning. I really thought I would stay out on my own or a smaller practice.

I had my first partner, the woman I taught that first law school course with. She was wonderful. She ended up going in-house with her client. Then I partnered up with another amazing woman who has a robust IP practice. A lot of her clients happened to be in cannabis so there was a good synergy. Plus, she had associates and attorneys that were able to support me. She had a corporate attorney on staff, which by that point I really needed. My litigation background is very helpful training for working in a wide variety of areas. However, when you start getting into the more complex corporate needs and other practice areas, you need additional support.

I was with her maybe for about a year and a half or two years and greatly appreciative of my time there. My practice continued to grow until I found myself wanting to get back to a larger firm where I would have associate and partner support, a deep corporate bench, and access to attorneys in other practice areas, such as real estate and employment. That is how I came to Benesch. Benesch is a very forward-thinking firm. They have been nothing but supportive of my practice. And having that deep bench really helped my practice to flourish.

**MP: Tell us about your practice and how the shifting state of the cannabis industry impacts your work.**

**BD:** My practice is national; I have clients all over the country and a few outside of it. I work with clients of all sizes, from large multistate operators to new entrants in the industry who just won their license. Because my law firm is full service, we can handle any needs that they have, many of which are the same needs any other company has.

And then I also have a hemp practice. Hemp is cannabis, but it is federally legal because it has only trace amounts of the cannabinoid that produces intoxicating effects. There is this whole other legal world related to hemp, with different rules and regulations.

I also have several clients that are ancillary businesses. They do not touch the plant, but they service the industry—the so-called “picks and shovels.” That can involve working with publishers around advertising and marketing or advising clients who just happen to do business with cannabis businesses and need advice around their own legal exposure in working with that industry.

Finally, I have a pro bono practice, supporting not-for-profits working towards greater social equity in the industry and advising on legislative matters.

**MP: Do you have the top three tips you would give to a lawyer who wants to be a successful rainmaker today?**

**BD:** The biggest thing for me was finding a niche. My prior practice was focused on big-ticket, bet-the-company type litigation, where hundreds of millions of dollars or more were at stake. The subject matter could be anything—it was quite general. It was very rare to see women rainmakers getting hired for these types of cases. The large institutional clients tend to get passed down within firms, and even then, it seemed to be mostly to men. And frankly, running that type of practice is very difficult for anyone who wants much of a life outside of it, or to support a family. I'm a bit farther removed from this world now, so hopefully there are more women rainmakers out there handling this type of litigation.

Finding a niche, and my niche was cannabis, was essential for my success. I was able to make a lot of noise around that, because it is an area of such interest to people. Finding a niche that I was able to market

myself around was the biggest thing for me in terms of being able to build a book of business.

A second tip would be the importance of cultivating the clients you have because that has been my biggest source of referrals. My clients have supported my practice growth and been great at putting my name out there. So paying attention and taking care of those relationships is key.

Finally, the third tip is to cultivate your relationships with other attorneys whether they are in your practice area or outside of it. Cannabis is a small industry and other attorneys have been very helpful to me. There are a lot of conflicts, so it is always good to have relationships that lead to referrals. And then, because so many attorneys know what I do, I get a lot of referrals from attorneys who are not connected to the space.

**MP: How do you balance your parental duties with your legal practice?**

**BD:** I am so grateful for my firm. I have so much flexibility. They have allowed me to do what I need to do since my first child was born to build my practice and care for my family. I pick up my kids from school all the time. We had a nanny since my daughter was born, who was integral to our family. She passed away at the beginning of the pandemic, which was devastating. We have a great babysitter now although we do not have her every day.

The good thing about my work is that I can do it from anywhere for the most part. My husband is in family law and is in court almost every day. That makes it a lot harder for him to be flexible for the kids. Whereas I can totally do what I need to do and work from home if needed. I appreciate that flexibility. But I do like going into the office and hope that trend continues to grow since things are back open now. Working from home all the time would not be for me.

**MP: When building or maintaining client relationships, do you think there is a difference between virtual versus in-person meetings?**

**BD:** I do travel a fair amount for work to see my clients and for industry events and conferences. My clients want to see me in person even though they are still doing a lot virtually. I still make the effort to go to see them.

As for building rapport, there is something about being in person that is important. I do think virtual meetings have been a great option. It is nice to see clients online, especially the ones you've never met. But I also think that there are benefits to being in person that you do not get from being online with someone.

## About the Author

*Michele Powers is a certified coach for lawyers and law firms and is the current chair of the Attorney Well-being Committee of the ABA Law Practice Division. Contact Michele at [michele@elitelawyercoach.com](mailto:michele@elitelawyercoach.com)*

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