

Asking a Question is a Marketing Technique

I was talking with a senior associate recently about his personal business development plan. He has a good connection in the in-house legal department of a major corporation in his market. We discussed taking this in-house lawyer out to lunch as a way to build the relationship further, but the associate was uncomfortable with the approach. When I asked him why, he said, "I don't know what to talk about."

Sometimes lawyers forget that when dealing with business prospects, it's not about talking; it's about listening. One of the most effective things you can do when building relationships is to ask good, informed questions.

BENEFITS OF QUESTIONING

The benefits of asking your targets questions are many. The first is to determine whether you and the person being targeted will gain anything from continuing to develop the relationship. The goal in any business relationship is that it is mutually beneficial, and that is not the case in every situation.

The second is to engage the person with whom you are making contact. When contacts give you input, they feel good about helping you and ultimately, they feel invested in you and want to contribute to your success.

The third is to gain information that will help you in your marketing and business development efforts, as well as in your practice. Asking question will help you learn what is important to others and how you might tailor your services to better fit their particular needs.

SOME REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES

There are myriad situations in which you can use questioning to engage a client, potential client or referral source. Here are just a few examples of how being inquisitive can pay off in business development efforts.

The target: Potential clients who have attended more than one of the seminars or webinars at which you have spoken.

The opportunity: Calling or e-mailing to get input on future topics. You might say, "I am always interested in getting

feedback from people who attend our programs so that we can plan to cover the most important or valuable issues in the future." From there you can probe hot topics in the field or profession and inquire about the kinds of things that are of most concern to the target and his/her colleagues. By reaching out, you make personal contact with a prospect and gain information that you can use to shape future programming.

The target: A business executive who attends meetings of an industry association that you frequently attend.

The opportunity: Visiting the company's business office to learn more about the company's operations and industry. In your request, you could say, "As you may know, I focus a big chunk of my law practice on representing auto dealers. I would love the opportunity to see your operations and ask you questions about where you think the future of the industry is going." In addition to taking a tour and visiting with an industry player first hand, you will have the opportunity to ask about how the person got into the field, how the company differentiates itself from its key competitors, what anticipated changes and innovations are expected in the near future and what legal issues are of most concern.

The target: An accountant who serves on a board with you.

The opportunity: Taking the accountant to lunch to learn more about her practice. The invitation should be along the lines of, "I'd like to learn more about what you do and with whom you work to find out if there are ways I can help you." At lunch, you can ask questions about the nature of her practice and her clients, what she considers her "sweet spot," how



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you would recognize a good opportunity for her, what kind of interactions she has with lawyers, whether she refers business to lawyers and, potentially even, to whom the referrals go. As a result of a lunch like this, you may identify where your two practices intersect or potential joint marketing opportunities (like co-authoring an article).

The target: A business person you know from a civic organization who works in the franchising area, an industry in which you'd like to do more work.

The opportunity: Doing some research through an informational interview. You can tee it up by saying "I know your company is a leader in franchising, and I am interested in focusing more of my practice in that area. I'd love to take you to breakfast and learn more about the field." When meeting, you can ask what organizations are most effective, what publications he or she reads most often and what other resources are available to franchisors. You can even ask for suggestions the person may have for you, and your professional development, as you continue to market this type of practice.

The target: An in-house counsel whose company has a facility in a market in which you would like to do more business.

The opportunity: Doing some intelligence gathering on the market through an informational interview. When you call and say, "I know you're really busy, but I'd love to get your thoughts on the XYZ market. I have been doing some work there, and am interested in your view of the legal landscape." Through your call or meeting, you can probe the prospect's thoughts on local law firms, the various types of legal work that are most prevalent, and where the in-house counsel perceives there are substantive

weaknesses among local sources of legal services.

The list of opportunities is endless: Interviewing a client after the first file is complete to find out how you did; interviewing a prospect for an article you are writing; asking an outside advisor to weigh in on a new service or pricing strategy you are considering; asking a client to review your website bio before it goes live.

Keep in mind that the goal is to ask *informed* questions. You never want to ask a question when the answer is readily available in the public domain. Therefore, before your meeting, you should gain as much information about the person you will meet and ask questions of and as much knowledge about his or her business as possible. For instance, you should visit the respective company website and read the person's bio, as well as search Google for his or her name.

EPILOGUE

The senior associate referred to earlier set up his lunch with the in-house lawyer. After the meeting, she returned both enthused and educated. He received incredible insight into how the company selects counsel, what is most important to the business, what in-house staff both likes and doesn't like when working with outside law firms, and suggestions for future activities. The result of the lunch was a closer personal relationship and a fountain of information.

The moral? The next time you're tempted to do all the talking, think about asking a question and listening instead in order to build a relationship. **LP**

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