

PLAY TO WIN

Make the Most of Business Development Meetings

By [Sally J. Schmidt](#) | Feb.14.18 | [Business Development](#), [Checklist](#), [Daily Dispatch](#), [Law Practice Management](#), [Legal Marketing](#)



Over the years, I've conducted thousands of client interviews to gather feedback on outside counsel. The discussion frequently turns to how a firm first started representing the client, leading to stories about what lawyers do well — or not so well — when trying to pitch for business. Mistakes range from not doing enough to doing too much in business development meetings.

Let's assume you have an opportunity to meet with a prospective client to discuss helping with a company's legal work. Here are do's and don'ts to make the most of your opportunity.

Preparing for the Meeting

- Don't go to meetings unprepared. One client told me a law firm showed up and didn't know the company was privately held. Do your homework on the entity, the decision-makers, the people who'll be interviewing, your firm's relationships with the entity, your firm's relevant experience, the company's use of outside counsel, and many other items.
- Do make sure you understand what the client expects. Another client said they were expecting a formal presentation but the law firm hadn't prepared one. You should clarify the meeting format, time constraints, participants and the like.
- Do be creative in preparing materials. Clients don't want a thick folder with information on multiple practice groups or dozens of lawyers. If you develop materials in advance, customize them with an eye to why counsel is being sought. One firm came to the pitch meeting prepared to discuss three different scenarios for handling the matter. Another, meeting with a craft beer manufacturer, brought coasters with its lawyers' pictures and bios on them.
- Do assemble the right team. One firm was selected because it had the only team that included an associate. Do you have the right expertise, personalities, geography and seniority represented in the room? At the same time, try not to outnumber the company representatives.

Preparing Your Message

- Do focus on what makes you different from other potential counsel candidates. Lawyers often make the mistake of talking about credentials or expertise that can be found on the firm's website. You can usually assume the prospect already thinks you are qualified or you wouldn't be in the meeting. So what makes you the best choice for the job?
- Don't focus on process. Clients are more interested in outcomes. How have you helped similar clients or companies in the same industry? If possible, quantify your results.
- Do tell stories. Clients appreciate hearing about specific scenarios and case studies (obviously, without breaching client confidentiality).

Running the Meeting

- Don't talk too much. Even if this is a "beauty contest," you should engage the prospect, make the meeting interactive and listen more than you talk. Kick off the meeting with a question or two (for example, to test your assumptions). If you make a formal presentation, keep it short; reserve most of the time for questions and discussion. The more the prospect talks, the better your chances of getting the work.
- Do ask informed questions. In addition to showing off the research you did or your understanding of the situation, you may learn something useful for your discussion, such as company imperatives.
- Don't be inflexible. One client told a story about representatives of a firm who showed up with a PowerPoint presentation. When the prospect said they would prefer just to have a more informal conversation, the lawyers insisted on giving their spiel. Needless to say, the firm did not get the work.
- Do be enthusiastic. Show genuine interest in getting the assignment.
- Do respect the prospect's time. Clarify at the beginning of the meeting how much time they have blocked out and keep a close eye on the clock.
- Don't focus on what you need or want. Focus on what the prospect needs or wants. And address objections head on. If they think your firm is too small or too expensive, be prepared to respond.
- Do add value to the meeting. Try to incorporate a little free advice so the prospect can start to sense what it would be like to work with you. The most effective pitch meetings are when the lawyers start acting like they already have the engagement.

Asking for Business

- Don't be overly ambitious. In some cases, you may be wiser vying for a particular substantive area or geographic location. You don't need to get all the work; you just need one file to turn the prospect into a client.
- Do ask for "advances." For example, "Can we take a closer look at the issue for you?" Or, "Could we follow up with Ron to learn a little more about the situation?"
- Don't have a hidden agenda. Be honest about your desires and intentions.
- Do be careful. If you can't realistically handle the work or part of the work, say so. You will build enormous credibility.
- Do be opportunistic. If you hear decision triggers — such as "How long would this take?" and "When could you get started?" or "How much would this cost?" — those are good signs that the prospect is interested and you should move quickly to address the questions.

Unique Situations, Different Expectations

Of course, every situation is unique and prospects have both different criteria for outside counsel and different expectations for pitch meetings. However, if you take the time to focus on the target and the target's needs instead of your own, you will vastly increase your odds of coming home with business.

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