

Play to Win

Seven Ways You May Be Sabotaging Your Business Development Efforts

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In initial meetings with lawyers, I like to have them tell me what they've done in marketing and business development — what has worked and what hasn't and what they are trying to accomplish. I'll never forget my first coaching meeting with one junior partner. When I asked her for her business development goals, her response was simple: "I just want to stop shooting myself in the foot."

She made a good point. Whether it's informal conversations with referral sources or formal presentations with prospects, lawyers often are their own worst enemies. There are many things you should — or shouldn't — do when faced with a business development opportunity. Avoiding missteps will vastly improve your odds of success.

Seven Common Business Development Mistakes

Here are some of the most common errors I see lawyers make in their business development efforts.

1. Lack of preparation.

Thinking about the meeting on the drive over to the client's office isn't sufficient. One of the keys to an effective approach is to be well-prepared. This includes researching the company, the person, the opportunity and the competition, among other things. It also includes preparing your approach — how will you open the meeting, what roles will people play, what questions do you need answered, what are the primary points you want to make ... the list goes on and on.

2. Lack of messaging.

One of the goals of your preparation is to anticipate concerns or inquiries that might come up in the meeting. What objections might prospects have to hiring you? What questions might they ask about the firm or your experience? For example, a target may ask you how your firm differs from the competition. Without an appropriate and concise response at the ready, you can come off as uncertain or even defensive.

3. Taking a lot of materials.

Law firm marketers often tell me about lawyers who request big packets of information before going to a business development meeting. They will ask for a folder with every practice group description or a pitch document including every partner in a certain office. Materials are often a crutch. If you do a good job in the business development meeting, you will learn a lot more about the person and the opportunity; as a result, materials will be more targeted and focused as a follow-up.

4. Failing to toot your horn.

Many lawyers are reluctant to talk themselves up. One way to deal with this is by having colleagues in the room to talk about each other. If you are alone, however, you absolutely must find a way to highlight your strengths and differentiators as well as the benefits you will bring to the relationship. Think about it from the client's point of view: Why should I hire you?

5. Talking too much.

When lawyers schedule a pitch meeting, they often think they have to fill the time by presenting prepared spiels. If you do this, you almost certainly will lose the attention of the prospect — if not the opportunity entirely. Ask questions. Pose assumptions and request feedback on them. Engage the target at every opportunity. The more you do that, the better the chances that you will connect with the person and ultimately gain their interest — and business.

6. Discussing discounts too early.

Lawyers are often too quick to offer pricing concessions. Ultimately, you should be trying to increase the perceived value of both you and your experience. By discounting right off the bat, you are in effect saying you're not worth the price.

7. Not staying in touch.

For many, if not most, of your opportunities, a business development meeting is just one step in a long process to get work. This means you need to find reasons and ways to continue the conversation. And the follow-up needs to be done by you, not your firm's marketing department. Without implementing strategic and sustained follow-up activities, you will not be successful in business development.

When it comes to developing business, some lawyers are “naturals”; most are not. If you are in the latter category, you can increase your chances of succeeding by understanding the process better and improving your skills. By avoiding the seven common mistakes outlined above, your likelihood of getting work from your business development efforts will rise dramatically.

Sally Schmidt, President of Schmidt Marketing, Inc., helps lawyers and law firms grow their practices. She was a founder and the first President of the Legal Marketing Association, is a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management and was one of the first inductees to LMA's Hall of Fame. Known for her practical advice, she is the author of two books, “Marketing the Law Firm: Business Development Techniques” and “Business Development for Lawyers: Strategies for Getting and Keeping Clients.” Follow her @SallySchmidt.