

SELLING AS A PROCESS, NOT AN EVENT

Successful partners create profitable pipelines of business. They will have their share of good luck, but their success will have been as a result of working a process. Not every partner's sales process is the same, but the activities set out below will be there in some form.

BEFORE THE MEETING

- **Have a business development action plan.** Most lawyers' business development plans are over-engineered, produced to a format that is designed by marketers. The plan, however, is usually thin by the time we get to the action paragraphs toward the end of the document. The output from your plan must be a series of actions which get you where you say you want to be, not just a list of people to meet.
- **Take the time to work the plan.** Time needs to be allocated in advance, in the diary. Not just meetings, but time to get on the phone to maintain relationships and make new ones. If you aren't giving 2 hours per week to client development (excluding meetings) you're not focused.



- **Target the right person to meet.** Networking at drinks parties is OK, but how many CEO's do you know who go to them? It's like fishing. Drinks parties are like using a net to see what you can catch. The big fish, however, belong to the rod-fisherman who knows what he's looking for, the bait to use, and where to go fishing.

- **Use your network to arrange a meeting.** Cold calling works for some (surprisingly), possibly because so few lawyers do it. Cold letters don't, neither do newsletters or press releases. The best way is to use the people you know. That's why things like LinkedIn are good. If you don't know what LinkedIn is, you've discovered another problem. Join the 21st century.
- **Prepare for the meeting.** The potential client has said "yes" to a meeting. Decide on what the aim of the meeting is (Get an intro to the CEO? Arrange a gathering of partners/directors? Gain a chance to be on a panel?), and then measure your effectiveness at the end. Do your research, but remember that they probably haven't read their own website, so won't necessarily know the "latest news" that the PR agency has added to their site. Prepare good questions to enable you to demonstrate what you know, find out new information, and make the client think. Expect the client to have only polite interest in your firm – unless it is linked to something you have established that they need.
- **Build rapport.** You don't need to be a party entertainer to break the ice. In fact for most of us it would be a mistake. You don't even need to be particularly interesting (with a wealth of anecdotes). You do, however, need to be interested and observant. Note the client's body language. Listen to how quickly and loudly s/he speaks. Adapt to their style before you try to talk business.
- **Open the meeting** – agree the structure. You really don't want to answer the question "so tell me about your firm". You really don't. The client is only being po-

THE MEETING

lite, and at this stage you don't know which bits will interest them. So take charge of the meeting – say that you'll begin by asking some questions, and begin with questions about them and their role, before working up to your researched questions.

- **Ask questions & listen to the answers**

This is the bit that marketing folks tell you that you need to do well. They're right, but even this bit is more than a chat. Structured questioning gets to the heart of the matter. Chatting fills an hour pleasantly. You want clients, not friends – unless they become both.

- **Explore issues raised.** Dig for pain and envisioning pleasure. Potential clients often know what they should be doing, but are unaware of the consequences of not taking action. An example is your personal will – over 50% of lawyers I talk to need to update their will. You know you should, so why haven't you? A good salesperson asks questions to unearth the pain of no action (*“what would happen if you died tomorrow?”* *“How would your wife feel if the money went elsewhere?”*), as well as the benefit of taking action (*“How long would it take – less than an hour?”* *“How would it feel knowing that you had an effective trust?”*). All too often a client takes no action when s/he should because the partner failed to drive home the need for action.



- **Propose solutions.** The client may be convinced that s/he should take action, but what specific action, and why with your firm? Now you know the client's challenges, you can offer suggestions, ideas and experience. Now is the time to bring in your expertise, your firm's experience and your relevant case studies and war stories. By focusing on the benefits that similar clients gained by taking action, you are providing valuable reassurance to your potential client, as well as providing him/her with evidence to cite to his or her internal colleagues.
- **Deal with objections.** An objection is a reason a client has for not taking the recommended action. Despite your best efforts, most clients will have them, although many will be reticent to voice them. Your challenge is to identify the risks/issues that the client is pondering, and address them directly (e.g. *“many clients initially think that our hourly rate is high, but are pleasantly surprised when they see the quality of the work and the speed we do it at”*)
- **Establish next steps.** Keep control. Make sure that the next action is yours (*“So we will meet with your FD and COO next month. Can I get my secretary to phone to do diaries?”*) When you send your follow-up e-mail after the meeting, make sure that you have summarised accurately, and if possible talk to the client to check that s/he is still comfortable with the agreed action.

AFTER THE MEETING

- **Follow up promises.** It is very easy to be so swamped with client work that the follow-up from new/potential client meetings gets lost in the miasma. The potential client will assume your efficiency is indicative of the way you would handle a legal matter. If you're very busy, manage expectations at the meeting, and then come within your promised deadlines.
- **Help the client.** Think added value. Think "out of the box". Demonstrate to the potential client that you're not just another lawyer in a nice suit. You can introduce them to useful people in your network, pull in a couple of favours on their behalf, or perhaps include them in an industry activity. These things have far greater long-term benefit than most partners realise.
- **Review your performance.** Did you get what you wanted? What could you have done better/differently. Learn from the meeting, update your action plan and try something different next time.

CONCLUSION

So that's the sales process.

We haven't addressed cross-selling to existing clients or key client management. Both of these draw some elements from the sales process, but require more detailed analysis and a fuller game plan.

You can now begin to understand why sales is a profession in its own right.

For suggestions on practical steps you can take to improve your selling skills, contact Jamie Pennington

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