

Practice Building

Making the Most of Business Development (Part 2)

By John F. Reed

Last month in part one of my Practice Building series, "Getting a Handle on Marketing," I wrote about the differences in legal marketing versus business development. This month, I focus on how to make the most of your business development by cultivating relationships.

To be clear, business development is not sales—a term lawyers have long rebelled against, and rightly so. Unlike salespeople, who largely push products and services that others ultimately deliver, attorneys seek out new clients and cases and also perform the work. Thus, business development is inherently and intensely personal, and involves a long process of earning and maintaining trust by initiating, cultivating, and leveraging relationships.

Networks and Networking

Whether you are creating your first business development plan or refreshing an existing one, the first step is to take stock of the people you know—your network. The aim of marketing is to reach members of a target audience who might generate billable work for your practice, but you shouldn't

define your network so narrowly. Friends, neighbors, community and religious group affiliations, classmates, vendors, and even soccer moms and hockey dads are important because of who and what they know.

The next step is to conduct a gap analysis. Are there people who aren't on your contact list but should be? Is there a company or group you could penetrate further by getting to know more people there? If so, use LinkedIn, company websites, membership lists, and other openly available intelligence tools to determine how your current contacts might serve as a nexus to those individuals. Through this system, you can identify professional associations, nonprofits and charities, or industry and trade organizations with missions and members that closely align with your own interests and where your participation may be worthwhile for networking.

And when it comes to networking, cut yourself some slack. Attorneys often place undue pressure on themselves to land a new client after a single interaction and without investing the time to foster the necessary comfort, chemistry, and context. It takes patience and realistic expectations to build trust in a relationship.

Advancing the Conversation

In the film version of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, an executive played by Alec Baldwin admonishes a group of salesmen to "A—always, B—be, C—closing," to constantly push customers into buying.¹ With all due respect to Mr. Mamet, the mantra for business development is "always be conversing."

Business development is about building trust-based relationships through a series of interactions and conversations. Different

from casual small talk or cocktail-party banter, business development conversations are more deliberate and goal-oriented, with three primary objectives:

- Build rapport by asking questions
- Uncover and understand needs
- Present solutions that may or may not relate to your practice

Keep in mind that it's far better to be *interested* than interesting. The easiest subject for someone to talk about is himself or herself, and when you show interest by asking members of your target audience appropriate and respectful questions, you put them at ease. The more comfortable your prospective clients feel about you, the more likely they will share details and needs, opening the door for you to offer assistance.

Not every need involves a legal problem, but that shouldn't dissuade you from being helpful. Sometimes making an introduction, forwarding an article or web link, or recommending a book might provide a solution. These kinds of gestures make you memorable and demonstrate your trustworthiness and integrity—cornerstones of the types of relationships you want to cultivate. This selflessness also opens the door to continued conversations, increasing your exposure to new opportunities.

One important piece of advice: in business development, as in many pursuits, hope is not a strategy. As a lawyer, your clients pay you to take control of difficult situations and deliver the best possible outcomes, and you must demonstrate skill and reliability even in the absence of a formal engagement. Many promising business development conversations flame out when the attorney tells the other person to "be sure to keep me in mind if anything comes up"

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or “please pass along my name if you know anyone who could use my help.” Don’t put that burden on your new contact. Timely e-mails and phone calls, personal letters, and invitations to connect on LinkedIn are simple techniques for following up and taking conversations to the next level.

Tracking and Prioritizing Your Contacts

Managing your contacts requires regular care and feeding, yet not everyone warrants the same level of attention. For most of us, time is in short supply, so creating a hierarchy across your network can be a useful exercise.

You don't necessarily need an expensive customer relationship management software program to track your business development pipeline. Contact management applications such as Microsoft Outlook and Mac OS X Address Book, a spreadsheet, or even a handwritten list on a napkin or sticky note can be an efficient system for organizing and prioritizing contacts.

Because so many of us live in Outlook each day, let's use its Contacts function as an example. Outlook lets you create multiple categories by which you can sort the people in your network. Start with basic labels like *client*, *prospect*, *lead*, *referring attorney*, and similar designations. Next, think about how often you need to communicate with each contact based on the person's strategic value to your business and place them in additional categories such as *monthly*, *quarterly*, *semiannually*, etc. Then determine the method of communication each contact deserves, like *meeting*, *entertain*, *phone*, or *e-mail*.

At the beginning of each month, break down your contacts into manageable to-do lists and action items. Those categorized under *prospect*, *monthly*, and *phone*, for example, are people you must call sometime in the next 30 days, while you might opt to touch those flagged as *lead*, *quarterly*, and *e-mail* by sending a pertinent news item or including them in a direct e-mail campaign by means of Constant Contact, iContact, MailChimp, or similar inexpensive providers.

The key is to regularly review your contacts' information and categories, updating their status and designations, and tweaking the system as necessary to ensure proper handling and consideration.

Be a Connector

The lawyer who sees himself or herself simply as a provider of legal services—and not as a trusted advisor to clients—often overlooks opportunities.

Becoming a trusted advisor means you truly understand the range of issues your clients encounter. You're not expected to provide a solution for each of those challenges, but if you show your knowledge and willingness to bring in other resources to help, you elevate your status and bolster your relationship.

Think about your best client—one you know well. What would make your client's life easier or his or her business more profitable? Can someone else in your network make that happen? Do you have other clients or contacts in similar situations, so that bringing them together to discuss their experiences might provide both parties with useful insights?

As you work hard to assemble your network, you need to leverage its value. Look beyond how your connections benefit you to how they can benefit each other. Irrespective of your matchmaking results, you will be recognized for your concern and the resourcefulness you demonstrate, further strengthening your relationships.

A Brief Word About Social Media

Regardless of how you feel about the likes of LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, social media plays an important part in business development.

Studies show that buyers of legal services—including individuals with personal legal issues as well as business owners and in-house counsel—seek referrals when selecting attorneys to represent them, and increasingly look online to validate and vet those referrals.² Having a social media presence, certainly on LinkedIn (and Facebook, too, if it's reasonably calculated to reach

your target audience) can be a relationship-building activity. For starters, devote the necessary time to creating and updating your personal profile on LinkedIn and make sure that your firm has a company profile as well. This guarantees that people searching for you online see current information that confirms what others tell them about you.

Similarly, along with meetings, phone calls, e-mails, and other means of communicating and staying in touch with your network, status updates (no more than a few each week) are effective methods for staying visible, relevant, and influential with your connections.

Each and Every Day

We often hear attorneys say they are too busy for business development, that when their workloads die down they will devote more attention to it. This is flawed thinking.

Those who commit to a daily regimen—and enjoy the results of their efforts—know that business development must be sustained for the long haul. By initiating and tending to important relationships, people recognize you for your skills and talents and steer opportunities your way. ■



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ENDNOTES

1. *Glengarry Glen Ross* (New Line Cinema, 1992).
2. See ABA Standing Committee on the Delivery of Legal Services, *Perspectives on Finding Personal Legal Services* (February 2011); LexisNexis, *How Today's Consumers Really Search for an Attorney* (February 2012); GreenTarget, Inside Counsel, and Zeughauser Group, 2012 *In-House Counsel New Media Engagement Survey* (January 2012).