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Let's Be Clear: Developing New Business Is NOT About Selling

by Kimberly Alford Rice

(Part 1 of 2)

What would have been your reaction if when starting a private practice you were told you needed to know how to sell to have a successful legal career?

"Sell what?" "I didn't complete years of educational training to be a salesperson." "I'm a legal professional, not a sales rep."

Yet, many lawyers seem to be astounded when they realize (or someone helps them realize) that when they are practicing in a private law firm or in their own firm, new business doesn't usually materialize on its own. What must happen, then, between looking to open a new matter and building a healthy book of business? How does the business "come" to you?

In nearly 20 years of law marketing, I have worked with hundreds of lawyers in all sized firms who seem to have at least one thing in common: they are similarly repulsed by the notion that to generate new business they must "sell" their services to likely buyers.

There is clearly a "disconnect" between what lawyers perceive to be "selling" and what is traditionally labeled "business development".

To many, the concept of selling is an unseemly and distasteful, less-than-ethical process which evokes images of used car dealers and ambulance chasers, and one which causes them to cringe. Often, these folks fear to be successful in building a practice, they will have to alter their authentic persona and adopt a more "pushy" and adversarial approach to generate new work. This mindset could not be further from the truth. Let me be clear, developing new business is NOT about selling.

The best business generators develop clients not coercing them to "buy" something they may or may not need but by employing some of the same critical habits they apply when delivering their services to clients:

- Genuinely caring about their clients' best interests and success
- Actively listening to clients' needs and concerns
- Identifying issues which may cause harm to clients and/or their businesses if left uncorrected
- Cultivating relationships which are predicated on building mutual trust and respect
- Routinely solving often difficult problems

Ok, if developing new business doesn't require selling, what exactly does it involve?

I will outline five principles which, if followed, will not only ease your anxiety about the business development proposition but which will also lead you to a more enjoyable client building experience and a bigger book of business.

Principal One - Build Rapport

We've all been told that it's "easier to catch more flies with honey than with vinegar", but when we examine that adage, what does it seem to suggest? Be a suck up? Behave in a contrived manner to get what you want? Not necessarily.

I would suggest that we embrace the more positive message of being kind to and making a connection with others. Herein lies the similar message of building rapport: to take a genuine interest in your prospects, their business and the challenges they face, and communicate that effectively in a variety of ways.

In a recent study measuring how people purchase professional services, 30% of professional services purchasers surveyed reported they had experienced no personal connection or chemistry with a professional services provider. (This may not seem like an issue unless one of those providers was your counsel when a former client filed a claim against you).

In this same study, 85% of the "unconnected" buyers would be either "somewhat or much more likely" to purchase their services if they felt some level of personal chemistry was present.

While there is nothing new about building rapport with prospects and clients, the concept is often mishandled.

First and foremost, when engaging a prospect, ***be your authentic self***. That's right, just be yourself. (Ok, be your "best" self). Don't try to be anything that you are not. It'll show.

Second, pay attention to timing. As much as you want to do business with someone, it's not going to happen until the purchaser (prospect) is ready. Relax. Cultivating genuine relationships can not be rushed or forced. That said, don't forget the "tending". Once you have established a connection with a prospect, proactively "attend" to it. Make regular contact; invite the prospect to an event or meal. Go out of your way to try to help that person in some way. Your efforts will be rewarded at some point.

Third, fully engage. Similar to the dating process, you want to ask open-ended questions to learn more. As you learn more about your prospect and her business, opportunities will arise to offer advice or suggestions on how to help her. This exchange will go a long way to demonstrate to the prospect your level of interest and genuine intentions.

Fourth, tune in. When you engage in one-on-one communication with someone (not just a prospect), actively listen to them. That doesn't include formulating your next thoughts while the other person is speaking. Nor is it ok to scan your Blackberry emails or jot down notes on an unrelated issue. Really tune in and focus on what the other person is saying. Not only will you show the person courtesy but you may discover issues/problems with which you may help that might not have otherwise been uncovered. Seems simple, but it is a recurrent complaint among clients that their legal advisor does not really listen to them.

Lastly, ***be prepared*** to accept that you will not share a chemistry with everyone you meet. That's to be expected. We all have a unique nature. Despite that, extend courtesy and respect to all knowing that referrals emanate from all sources.

In the second installment, I will address the remaining four points which illustrate why developing new client relationships does not involve selling, in the traditional sense of the word.