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## CAREER CONSULT

# Learning How To Close 'The Deal'

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If you follow baseball, you know that a "closer" is the pitcher who comes into the game in the ninth inning and secures the win. Having a good closer is not an essential element in having a winning record. But it certainly helps to have someone who can shut down the opposing team's offense when the end of the game is imminent. Teams with a strong closer win more games.

Similarly, you don't have to be a great closer to build a legal practice. Over time, doing great work and delivering great service will generate prospects, and some of these prospects will decide to retain your services. But knowing how to turn prospects into committed clients (i.e., knowing how to close) will improve your chances of "winning" business from these prospects.

So what does it take to become an effective closer? How can you increase the chances that prospective clients will decide to hire you to handle an asset purchase or a litigation matter? If you are taking the time to build your professional visibility, how do you take casual business acquaintances and turn them into paying clients?

To find out the answer to these questions, I decided to interview two experts on the subject, Harry Keshet and Ed Shulkin.

According to Keshet, "closing" is not something you can view in isolation. Closing is part of the entire business development and selling process.

A marketing psychologist who coaches lawyers and other professionals on effective business development skills, Keshet teaches a five-step "solutions-oriented" selling process to lawyers.

#### **\* Preparation Before Meeting With a Prospect is Essential**

The first step in Keshet's process involves preparation and understanding the prospective client's needs. When scoping out a potential client, it is essential to learn as much as you can about the individual and his business. The Internet can be a good starting place; but tapping into your own network of contacts can also greatly assist in helping you to find out more about the company or individual. At a minimum, you should be fully aware of any important public information that is readily available.

Once you have done your background research, you can form a hypothesis about what legal needs the prospect may have. Demonstrating that you are prepared and know something about the individual is one way to get the prospect to reveal more information about his needs and concerns. Coming unprepared and demonstrating a lack of knowledge of basic information about the prospect can have the opposite effect.

For example, suppose you read that a technology company is planning to open a new plant in your area and real estate is your specialty. Through your existing network, you discover that you have a contact at the company. You ask your contact for an introduction to the senior vice president in charge of manufacturing and the senior vice president agrees to meet with you. So what do you do at the meeting?

#### **\* Deepen Your Understanding of the Client's Problem**

After spending some initial time trying to establish rapport with the prospect (talking about family, vacations, sports, music or whatever common interests you can discern), find out how far they are into the process and what issues they are encountering in obtaining financing and permits.

In this second step of the business development process, you are asking a lot of open-ended questions to develop your understanding and the prospect's understanding of the significance of any problems they identify. If they say they do not like the lender they are working with, find out why. Are they unhappy with the interest rate that they have secured? Is the lender moving too slowly? Ask the prospect: "If I could help structure a better rate, how valuable would that be to you?" "If I could help you close this deal in less than four months, would that be significant?"

This second step of the selling process (i.e., where you actually identify a specific problem that the individual wants to solve) might be completed in the first meeting with a prospect. But it is more likely to be completed in the course of several meetings and conversations that might go on over the course of several days or months.

#### **\* Listen for the Magic Words**

Step three of the business development cycle involves listening for a signal that the client is interested in solving a problem. Some of the phrases you might hear include: "How would *you* help me?"; "What would *you* do?"; or "Tell me what *you* would suggest?" In this step of the process, the prospect is shifting from talking about a problem to asking for a solution.

#### **\* Offer a Solution and Gain Commitment**

In the final steps of Keshet's five-step process, you offer a solution and get the prospect committed to moving forward. Since the solutions you offer are directly tied to the specific issues or problems that the prospect wants solved, the prospect becomes committed to retaining your services. The key in all of this is asking questions that help the prospect "self identify" the benefits of working with you.

Clients can frequently come up with more benefits than you can because they know more about their business and have a deeper understanding of the personal implications of successfully resolving important issues or problems.

Continuing with the example above, to gain the client's commitment you ask: "How important would it be if you can get the deal closed in under four months"; "What would it mean for your company if we could decrease your financing costs by 2 percent?"; "What do you see as the most important aspect of resolving this issue in the near term and for the future?"

By asking questions that help the client reflect on the business benefits and personal benefits, you have essentially let the client close the deal (i.e., make the decision to hire you).

### **\* Listening is the Key**

Ed Shulkin is an executive coach who has experience coaching senior executives, top-level managers and entrepreneurs. He suggests a similar approach to closing business. According to Shulkin, listening is the key to effective closing, and he suggests that you get as much information from a prospect as possible before you try to close. The key in developing the business relationship is to be a great listener rather than a great orator.

Shulkin places particular importance in listening to some of the side remarks that the prospect might make. Statements that begin with "If only..." and "I wish..." can give you great insight into the key needs and concerns of an individual. When you hear statements like this, it is important to ask: "Why is that a problem for you?"

Like Keshet, Shulkin also suggests getting the prospect to participate in coming up with a solution to his problem. If there is some way you can to quantify the expense of the problem, then you can get the prospect to discuss how important the solution might be to them. Shulkin believes that it is critical to continue to probe down to get to the root core of the issue. It is also critical to find out if the person with whom you are speaking is the decision-maker and if not, how to get to the decision-maker or what the process is for making a decision.

### **\* Use Closing Language**

In trying to close a potential client, there are certain phrases that can help you to secure the business. Some of the closing scripts that Shulkin offers include: "Do you think that our firm can be of help to you?" If the answer to this question is "no," then find out why or what they need to know in order to make the decision to retain your services.

Some final questions might include: "Are you ready to get started?" or "When do you want to get together?" or "Is there anyone else that needs to be involved?"

### **\* Self Confidence is the Most Important Factor**

Finally, Shulkin believes that confidence in yourself is probably the most important variable in closing business. If you believe in your own ability to help a prospective client, the client will be more inclined to hire you. If you express ambivalence about your ability, the individual will

pick up on this and be less likely to retain your services.

Many of us were brought up to believe that it is in bad taste to brag about yourself. But tooting your own horn works— especially if you limit your bragging to things you know are true about yourself.

Think about your own experience in hiring other professionals. If someone you are thinking of hiring looks you straight in the eye and tells you confidently that he can help you, you might be inclined to retain that individual. You will probably be more hesitant if someone says to you, "I think I can help, though I've never really handled a situation like yours. I'm pretty new to the profession."

Closing is an important skill for anyone who wants to build a legal practice. While building relationships, writing articles, increasing your visibility through speaking, getting involved in community activities and doing great work will all help you to generate business leads, understanding how to turn leads into business will help you increase your success rate in changing prospects into paying clients.

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