

[“Set the Table” to Win Your Next New Client](#)

By [Cordell Parvin](#) on May 9th, 2013

I recently met [PJ Dunn](#) when he visited my office. We hit it off right away and enjoyed telling each other stories. At one point in his career, PJ sold advertising to law firms for the [Dallas Business Journal](#). He knows how to sell without coming across as a salesman.



As soon as I met PJ, I knew he could share some valuable tips that you can implement. I asked him to do a guest blog and I hope this is the first of a series. After you read this, if you have a topic you would like for PJ to address here, please let me know.

The door opens to the elevator. You step off and grab the brass handle to the all glass door. You are now in the office of a potential dream client and you are on time. Kudos! However, your stomach is in knots, your nerves are tense like the muscles on an Olympic runner who is in the blocks waiting for the sound of the gun.

You swallow intensely and then the thought hits you. I didn't go to law school to be a salesman. True enough, however you now have to compete with all the other three or four name law firms in town who pretty much have comparable skills to yours, and frighteningly perhaps more.

In the sales world I am a card carrying eighteen year veteran. Many days did old man experience teach me some valuable lessons that I still keep close to the vest today. My favorite one (which addresses the scenario described above) is the concept of “setting the table.”

Here are some thoughts: Imagine you have first time guests coming over for dinner. Notice how you ‘set the table’ so as to make everything comfortable, handy, and without complication.

You not only have clean and interesting plate ware on hand, but also napkins and a drink reservoir filled to capacity so that no one has to get up once you engage in the meal. All the tools you will need to eat the meal are at arm’s reach.

A gracious host will even ask if the temperature in the room is preferred. All of this takes place to insure that the dining experience at your home is a comfortable and natural event.

When you are engaging in a natural event there is no need to be nervous, tense, or anxious. You are the most influential version of yourself, in part because you are doing something that is natural to you. But, you might think the analogy breaks down since you are going to the client’s office, and not the other way around.

As valid as this point is, it is also a valid point that you can still have the ‘set the table’ mentality no matter whose turf you are on. Think about how you can ‘set the table’ when you visit a potential client.

How would you ‘set the table’ at your clients office? Consider the five components of ‘setting the table’ from a business based scenario.

1. Get the client to relax, (Be aware of how they are projecting, smile, speak in clear tones, be mindful of your body language, be humble)
2. Establish the agenda and get to it, (ask if it is okay to get started, let them know you are equally interested in being a good steward of time)
3. Seek the clients input early and often, (it's a must to understand your clients issue as they experience it)
4. What obstacles might we face? (the client knows their in-house politics better than you, help them think through it with you there)
5. Now what? (Once everyone is in agreement that the discussion has been fruitful, indicate that you are ready for their commitment)

The sure fire way to get rid of knotted stomachs and anxious behavior is to remove the variables that cause them. Fear of the unknown doesn't bother the mature seller because 'setting the table' helps keep him or her not only in control but in a natural friendly way.

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years practicing law. At Jenkins & Gilchrist, Mr. Parvin was the Construction Law Practice Group Leader and was also responsible for the firm's attorney development practice. While there he taught client development and created a coaching program for junior partners. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. He is the co-author of *Say Ciao to Chow Mein: Conquering Career Burnout* and other books for lawyers. To learn more visit his Web site, www.cordellparvin.com or contact him at cparvin@cordellparvin.com.