

Generating Leads with the “Right” Questions

By Stephen E. Seckler, Esq.*

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing...Never lose a holy curiosity. Albert Einstein

We are all familiar with the image of the fast talking and overly gregarious used car salesman. It is a stereotype that lawyers generally want to avoid emulating at all costs. Most of us became attorneys because on some level, we wanted to steer clear of business.

Selling, however, is a very important skill if you want to succeed in private practice. Competition for legal work has never been greater.

The good news is that selling legal services is not like selling used cars. Clients hire lawyers they trust. Since building that trust generally happens over time, smooth talking and high pressure tactics are unlikely to be effective in convincing an individual to retain you as their lawyer.

Instead, you must invest time and effort in building your relationships with target clients or with referral sources.

Market Like You Counsel

Put another way, success in legal sales requires good lawyering skills. If you are good at asking probing questions and listening carefully to the answers, then you can be very successful in building your practice.

An experienced lawyer understands the value of asking probing questions and attentive listening. It is only through this give and take that an attorney can properly assess a client's situation. Likewise, using these good counseling skills can help you reveal legal needs that a prospect may have or other ways that you can further your relationship.

The Mechanics Of Good Listening

Being a good listener is not a passive role. Rather, a good listener is someone who uses active listening skills. It is insufficient to keep quiet and let the other person do all the talking. It is only through some sort of feedback that the other party knows you are taking it all in and not simply day-dreaming about your upcoming vacation.

There are a number of verbal and non-verbal clues that tell someone you are actively listening to him or her. Try to get the other individual to speak 80 percent of the time. If you are meeting face-to-face, body language can send the right signals. Good eye contact and nodding one's head periodically can demonstrate a real interest in the other person (in contrast, looking at your smartphone conveys the opposite). Paraphrasing what the individual has said and asking clarifying questions also demonstrates active listening.

The Right Questions

While listening is a key skill in relationship building, learning how to ask probing questions is equally important. If you come to a meeting armed with the “right” questions, you will find it much easier to get the other person you are meeting to open up.

So what are some of the types of questions that you should be asking when you meet with clients, prospective clients and potential referral sources? What are the categories of questions that will give you clues about the ways that you can be helpful (and build trust, and ultimately build the relationship)?

Do Some Advanced Research

One of the tenets of being a good listener is to ask a lot of open-ended questions. On the one hand, this is all you really need to know about asking questions. You can simply ask: “What's keeping you up at night?”, “What are you working on these days?” or “What do you do for fun when you are not working?” Each of these questions is bound to elicit some clues about the business problems that the individual is facing and about their personal interests.

While “What's keeping you up at night?” may generate some leads for you (by uncovering legal issues that need attention), as a marketing tool, asking this question may come across as cliché. Even worse, this particular question hints of intellectual laziness. It may convey a sense that you have no idea what this individual is up against and you have not bothered to do any homework to find out.

Sometimes, there is not much that you can find out in advance of meeting a prospect. But you won't know until you do some research. If you were introduced to the individual by a mutual contact, find out what your contact knows about the person and their company.

Read the press releases on their company's website (if there are any). Find and read their profile on LinkedIn. Do a Google search to see if their company has been mentioned by other mainstream or alternative media sources. Review court dockets to see whether they or their company has been involved in litigation in recent years. Find out something that is happening in their industry or profession and get their reaction. If you have done work in the past for the individual, review your notes so that you can inquire about the outcome of the project.

Overall, make sure you learn enough so that you can come up with some questions that sound like you are informed about the prospect (at least about things you could have easily learned through their website or through a Google search).

Personal interests and affiliations should also be explored. If you discover that you have any common interests, that you have attended any of the same schools, that you live in the same town or that you belong to any of the same political, religious, cultural or athletic organizations, those can become the basis of very strong ties.

The specific questions you ask will depend on who you are trying to cultivate and what you find out. If you tap your own sense of curiosity, marketing in this way can actually be fun. Don't wing it, though. Be prepared and over time, you will see the fruits of your relationships building. In the meantime, here are some examples and further guidelines to help you get ready for your next networking meeting:

In a conversation with a real estate developer: *We are hearing that multifamily residential development is one active area in construction. What are you hearing? Are you planning to get involved in any of these projects?*

In a conversation with a therapist: *I heard an interesting story about the growing use of music therapy to treat speech loss. Are you seeing art and music therapy being used more with children whose parents are going through a divorce?*

In a conversation with a client you represented in an employment discrimination case: *What has been going on at work since we settled your case? Are you getting the responsibility and assignments that you wanted in your new job? Have you been able to keep up with any of your former colleagues?*

In a conversation with a contact who was written about in the Boston Business Journal: *I saw that nice article about you in the BBJ. I didn't realize that you grew up Ann Arbor, Michigan. That's where I grew up. Which high school did you attend?*

In a conversation with a small business person: *I saw on your website that you have plans to expand to more locations in 2012. Have you secured financing yet for the expansion?*

General Areas for Follow Up: *If you made a referral, ask the contact about their experience with that professional. Ask the contact to tell you what questions you should ask your other contacts (i.e. that might elicit a need for their services.) Ask the individual if they would like you to send them an article on a subject you discussed when you met; or if they would be interested in hosting a free client seminar on the subject. Find out if they are interested in presenting a seminar or in co-authoring an article that is targeted to your mutual clientele.*

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