

Ten steps to rainmaking success

Business development consultant Pippa Blakemore gives *IBA Daily* readers some tips to sharpen their sales skills

Marketing and sales skills are becoming increasingly important at every stage of a lawyer's career. So much so that some firms have begun to set business development and marketing expectations at each year of qualification, so that even newly qualified lawyers are involved in making contacts with their peers in other law firms or commercial organizations. The following 10 simple steps will help to make selling more productive, enjoyable and satisfying for those who joined the legal profession to be a lawyer rather than a salesman.

Step 1: Think like the client

Keep in mind the pressures that clients are under. In-house counsel may have several hundred internal clients across several jurisdictions. With litigation in particular, clients might feel daunted by the thought of a threatening workload, resentful about needing external legal help, afraid of escalating costs and concerned by negative publicity. They might feel the issue is a distraction from their core business. They might even feel defensive, asking themselves whether they are responsible for the litigation or could have prevented it. Therefore, work on the basis that you need to *think* for your client, making suggestions and proposals, that you should *communicate* with them (for example by asking questions rather than waiting to be told), that emails and documents you send to the client to read should be concise, focussed and relevant and that you should not wait to be asked, but *offer to help*.

Step 2: Understand how clients choose their lawyers

Organizations buy legal services when they have a commercial imperative. They require those services to help them achieve their strategic goals. They want lawyers who understand their business and the commercial implications of any advice given. However, clients are also looking for lawyers with whom they get on. They want their advisers to be as committed to achieving their goals as they are, to give them the comfort of experience without being blasé, to treat them and their matter as unique, special and interesting, to understand their perspective and feelings and to allow them to sleep easily at night. You can't get a client to want or need litigation, but you can get them to want *you* when that is required.

Step 3: Write a business plan

Assess where you are now in terms of skills, experience, profile, maturity of market and your competition. Then clarify where you would like to be with regard to geography, industry, market, sector and individual companies. Plan how to get there, balancing the expectation of additional work, from existing clients and new work from new clients. Evaluate how realistic your hopes are, given your established credibility, expertise, track record, hunger for winning new work, and the resources, time and budget you can devote to doing so.

Publicise the criteria for pursuing the business you want. Who among the clients that already instruct you would you like more work from and why? Do you have influence with the decision-makers? How easy will it be to win further work from them? Will the work be appropriately high-profile, profitable and generate repeat work? Which new clients would you like and why? Where are the good sources of referrals?

Then create focussed and concise business plans for the firm, individual practice areas, teams and individuals. These should be detailed for the period covering the following six months and broader for the next two years. Set simple, realistic targets and objective measures of success and agree regular times to review progress.

Step 4: Talk to existing clients even when they are not instructing you

Clients feel neglected if the only time you communicate with them is when you are billing them. Nurture them. They are your greatest source of new business.

Use every stage of the relationship with your client to

find out more about them, giving you the opportunity to offer to help to meet their needs. When the client is giving you new instructions, discuss with them their commercial objectives. This can often highlight further opportunities for work. During the course of your work for the client, additional opportunities might also become apparent. De-briefing and reviewing with the client at the end of a project gives a further chance to find out what else is happening in the client's organization. If no immediate opportunities to help arise, plan a way forward to keep in touch with the client, in the same way as you did with the business plan.

Step 5: Make networking a habit

Networking isn't about selling. It is about building a rapport between you and the person you are talking to. Networking at targeted events is an essential part of implementing your business plan. It enables you to find out what is going on in your target industry, meet the key players and keep up-to-date with the challenges they are facing.

For those who find networking daunting, build your confidence by doing your preparation on the industry and on the people attending an event. Read their industry journals to up-date yourself on current issues. Prepare a few well-informed open questions based on your research to ask those you are targeting and those you meet casually. Prepare some anecdotes and stories from your own experience, which are industry-relevant, entertaining, amusing and will grab people's attention and help them to remember you. But don't forget, good networking is more about listening than talking. Networking is about being interesting and genuinely interested. Try and find a reason to follow up and keep in touch with each person with whom you want to develop a relationship.

Step 6: Keep in touch regularly

The following are all ways to keep in touch:

- When you return from an event make notes on all the conversations you had, pass on information and follow up all the commitments you made.
- Monitor potential clients and referrers, so that you can respond appropriately when, for example, they have been promoted, have won an award, changed jobs or changed organizations.
- Contact a client when their company's results or a re-organization are announced.
- Write a one-page summary of the effects of new legislation on a client's company – but do not bill them for it.
- Maintain your profile through targeted newsletters, updates on judgments and notification of relevant changes within the firm.
- Offer training, seminars and secondments.
- Offer your firm's hospitality, at small, specific, targeted and not necessarily costly events.
- Tell individuals about a relevant matter you have worked on or an article you have written that might be of interest. Highlight the key passages.
- Call clients occasionally to ask: "How are things going?"

Step 7: Arrange to meet

To obtain a sales meeting you need to pick up the telephone. Don't make arrangements by email at this stage. One high-ranking corporate executive, regularly overwhelmed by too many incoming emails, deleted any that did not come from his superiors.

There are six stages of a successful call: Make the introduction clear: say your name and that of your firm slowly and clearly. Ask whether now is convenient to talk. Make it easy for the person to remember you. State the reason for ringing (such as: "I thought we could meet to give you an up-date on recent changes in European legislation and the potential impact on your industry"). Highlighting what's in it for the client gives you a better chance of them agreeing to meet. Seek agreement and fix the date, time and place to meet. Follow up by confirming all the details in writing.



Blakemore: Firms must think like their clients

Step 8: Research and be prepared for anything

Research as much as possible on all the individuals you are meeting from the client's organization: their experience, knowledge, likes, dislikes and their views of lawyers. Who would they want to meet? Consider taking a colleague. Research the client organization, industry, sector, market, competition and the problems they face. Research and know your own firm and the colleagues you are taking to the meeting.

Be prepared for anything at the meeting. If you have agreed with the client to meet for a casual chat be aware that it might actually be a beauty parade, and so require structured preparation.

Step 9: Discuss fees with pride

Your initial fee discussion will demonstrate how you will manage fees throughout the relationship. If you are embarrassed or defensive about fees this will undermine your authority with the client.

It is essential that you discuss fees with the client before you start the work. Clients want transparency, predictability, to be kept informed and to be consulted. Give the client as much detail as possible on what has been done, by whom, at what rates – even if it is not read. Clients do not want to be hit by large bills at irregular intervals.

Many clients feel that you get what you pay for and they also increasingly appreciate that lower fee-rates do not necessarily mean lower bills. So do not undervalue yourself, your firm and the legal services you offer by being apologetic about rates and immediately offering a discount. Be proud of who you are, what you offer, the benefits you bring and the value of your experience, track record and skills. For example, it often impresses clients to quantify your added value services in monetary terms.

Step 10: Ask for the work

All the effort you have put in so far will come to nothing unless you close the sale. So how do you spot the signs that the client is ready to buy? Most importantly, they must have a strong commercial need. Some of their indicative questions might be about your other commitments; potential conflicts of interest; the amount of work involved; how you and your teams will work together; how much time you will be able to devote to the client; and what resources you have. If these questions arise, then show your enthusiasm for the work. Make a clear and genuinely enthusiastic statement: "I would like to do this work for you."

Pippa Blakemore (pippa.blakemore@pep-partnership.co.uk) is presenting three sessions at this week's conference. Give a winning presentation on Wednesday morning; Turn contacts into clients on Thursday afternoon and Increase the value of current clients on Friday morning.