

Ten Tips for Unseating a Rival Law Firm

By Larry Bodine, Esq. of Glen Ellyn, (Chicago) IL. He is a business developer with 19 years experience who helps law firms attract and keep more clients. He can be reached at 630.942.0977 and LBodine@LawMarketing.com. For more information visit www.LarryBodine.com.

Every client worth having already has a law firm. Lawyers encounter this truth when they try to cross-sell a new service to a client. Many give up at that point, saying, “they’ve already got another law firm. There’s no point.” This is like saying you won’t drive in a parking lot because there’s a speed bump.



Larry Bodine

In business development, you must realize that at some point you’re going to have to unseat a competing law firm. Obviously, if that firm is referring you business, pick another client to pursue. But if you find that some remote law firm is eating your lunch by billing time to your client, it’s time to unseat the incumbent.

At the outset, know this: there’s a high likelihood you’ll succeed. There is a clear-cut trend in favor of smaller, cost-efficient law firms, and away from high-overhead megafirms. I attended the annual Association of Corporate Counsel meeting, and heard general counsel of Fortune 500 companies say they are actively seeking the top law firm in a secondary market. There is also a great deal of discontent among major corporations with their large law firms. Research shows that 60% of corporations are displeased with their current law firm and would not recommend them.

Going forward, bear in mind that the other law firm has the work, but not because they’re bigger, have smarter lawyers or offer more services. They have the work because *somebody* at the client has a relationship with *somebody* at the law firm. Corporations don’t hire law firms; an *individual* at a business hires a lawyer. Now you have your work cut out for you: your goal is to develop a better relationship than the lawyer at the competing firm has. You can do this even if the lawyer is the nephew of the client or the GC used to work at the competing law firm. Remember, most big companies are unhappy with their lawyers.

How to develop revenue-producing relationships

Remember the carnival game where you would shoot at a row of moving metal ducks? The ducks in this case are the decision-makers at a potential client. If your firm was smart enough to invest in a CRM system (client relationship management), you can simply print out a list of people whom your lawyers know at the client. If not, a good librarian can simply look up the names of the CEO, general counsel and other executives. These are the people to develop or deepen relationships with.

This is done by traveling in the same circles these people do. Every business person belongs to a trade association –the GC may attend meetings of the Defense Research Institute or the president may attend meetings of the industry trade association. You should make a point of:

1. Attending those trade association meetings and looking for them.
2. Asking a client who knows these people to make an introduction.
3. If you know the company's accountant, banker, insurance agent or financial advisor, ask them for an introduction.
4. Write articles for the e-newsletter or website of the association.
5. Get active in the association and propose to present a panel discussion about an industry trend. Invite your target contact to be a panelist.
6. Create a "wedge project" and use it to perform a useful service to the potential client. Common examples are audits of their labor and employment practices, an appraisal of their contracting policies compared with best practices, or a tour of their facilities to look for environmental issues. The idea is to get to know the client's business and create a checklist of legal work for yourself.
7. If you already know your target contact, call up and request a tour of the facilities.
8. Start a Google Alert about the individual and the company, and employ the information to make contact. For example, if the GC just won an award or was featured in an article, send the link to the GC. It doesn't matter that the GC already has seen it; the point is that you demonstrated that you thought about the GC.
9. Create a LinkedIn profile. This allows you to look up your target contact and join the same LinkedIn groups that they belong to. Start and participate in discussions in the group and send an invitation to the other person to join your network.
10. Study the client and offer them a better value proposition. This doesn't mean offering a cheaper rate. Instead, offer "concierge services" (where the client can

call for quick answers at a flat monthly rate), promise to return all phone calls and emails within 24 hours, or listen to their monthly earnings reports and immediately propose a service to deal with a problem they've identified.

Remember that all business comes in through relationships. The better your network of relationships is, the more business you'll have.

For more on this topic, call:
Larry Bodine, Esq.
Business Development Advisor
Tel: 630.942.0977
E-mail: Lbodine@LawMarketing.com
Web: <http://www.LarryBodine.com>

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