

Listening Your Way to New Business

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According to a German proverb, “A man has two ears and one mouth so that he hears much and speaks little.” Mark Twain followed up the thought by saying, “If we were meant to talk more than listen, we would have two mouths and one ear.” And I’ll add: We were given two ears and one mouth, and they should be used in that proportion in a sales call.

Listening is the one sales technique that lawyers shouldn’t live without. It saves you from having to make a pitch. Prospects hate being pitched (see discussion below).

The way to sell effectively is to meet a prospect and have five intelligent questions ready. The questions should demonstrate that you’ve made an effort to understand the prospect’s business. The questions are designed to get the other person talking. They will *tell you* all the things you’re supposed to look for to close the deal:

- The prospect’s business “pain.”
- What they want and how they want it.
- What’s not important to the prospect.
- Whether they have the money to hire you or buy your services.
- Every detail that should go into your proposal to hire you.

In fact, the prospect will *write the proposal for you* if you ask open-ended questions (those that cannot be answered by “yes or no,” such as “tell me more about that”) and just get them talking. By using the list-of-questions approach, you’ll have to hire an associate to keep up with all the work coming in.

Turning leads into sales

Lawyers get most of their leads from other lawyers, referral sources, colleagues and business friends. When you are talking with a prospective client, your initial question should be: “Why are you calling about this *today*? What has brought the matter to a head?” The prospect will fill you in on the company’s internal politics, what’s motivating them, the history of the matter and why they need your help.

To keep them talking you should ask them, “tell me more about that” or “what makes you say that?” Take notes the whole time the prospect is talking, because you will translate it directly into a proposal, if that’s what they want. Ask these other key questions:

- What have you tried before? Why didn’t that work?
- If the decision were up to you, what would you do?

- Who's in charge of the matter, and tell me about your role in it.
- If everything worked out perfectly, what would that look like?
- Do you have a budget for this?
- What's your deadline?
- Tell me about your business – what industries are your customers in? Describe your ideal customer. How does this matter affect your business?
- What's the main way your company makes money? What's your most profitable product or service? Are any of them losing money?
- Who are your competitors?
- What other lawyers are you talking to about this project?

When you've got a good picture of the situation, say, "OK, here's what I recommend we work on first." Note that you've assumed the "close" and are acting as if you're already doing business together.

In-person sales meetings

Always try to get an in-person meeting. This is what you really want, because new business comes *in person*, or "belly to belly" as one rainmaker told me, who had the large belly to match his advice.

Ask them to fax or email you "homework" in advance, so that you can study the firm's business. Ask them for the names of their top customers, their most profitable services or products, any written plans or strategy, copies of all their printed marketing materials, and the names of competing companies. Notice that these are *business* questions, because the client considers any legal matter to be a *business problem*.

You can learn a lot by studying the prospect's Web site, such as whether they are a market leader or startup. You should particularly read the prospect's bio, and memorize two or three points to bring up when you see them, like, "Oh, I noticed that you're an electrical engineer. How does that help in your business?"

Before the meeting, build your list of questions, and add a few simple steps they can take to limit their liability or complete their deal. Describe the quick fixes to them as a "free sample" of your advice, which also demonstrates your expertise. When you go to the meeting, leave your firm brochures and marketing materials behind; just bring the list of questions.

There are important differences between a phone call and an in-person meeting. When the prospect is talking to you in person, take off your reading glasses and look them directly in the eye, and stop doing anything else (like checking your PDA or looking for a file). You want them to know they have your full attention. At some point you should break eye contact to write down a note about what they said. This way they can tell you are *really* listening to them, and prospects like that.

Keep asking questions until you can form an opinion on what the solution or first step should be. At this point give out your “free samples” plus your invoice for a retainer or flat fee. Then suggest what you’ll start working on next and ask if they agree that it’s the right choice.

Ask. Ask. Ask. Answer. Answer. Answer. At the end of the conversation, the new client really feels that they have participated in the solution. They do not feel that they have been “pitched” or “sold,” but they transformed from a prospect into a client. They view you as a trusted advisor, not someone who is going to cram hard choices down their throat. And you know that you’re on the same wavelength as the client.

The importance of listening

New research conducted by Larry Bodine Marketing and market researcher Suzanne Lowe of Concord, MA, proves how important listening is. Our new research study, “Increasing Marketing Effectiveness at Professional Firms” compiles the responses of more than 375 marketers and practitioners in 12+ sectors. See <http://tinyurl.com/qdame>. They told us that a key way to measure your marketing effectiveness is *listening to the client and responding to what they say*. Those companies that listened to their customers reported that their marketing was “extremely effective.”

At the most basic level, we’re talking here about garden variety client satisfaction surveys or client perception interviews. (Among law firms, which are your specialty, only 40% conduct client feedback surveys. This is pathetic.) At a strategic level, we’re talking about digging to find the client’s pain and responding to their needs. Why is listening so effective? One respondent at a successful construction firm told us, “Because we are listening to our clients and making adjustments based on their input. Employees have also been surveyed for their opinions and while the survey is confidential, we are able to obtain objective information.”

David Koren, Marketing Director at Gensler, a New York architecture firm, told us, “Many people think there’s a secret to marketing Gensler, that there’s some magic formula to our success. There aren’t any secrets. The magic formula, to the extent that there is one, is listening and responding to clients.”

Don’t pitch your prospects

Why do used car salesmen have the worst reputation in the field? Because they pitch you. They bombard you with facts and information, and they try to trap you in a little room. Prospects hate that. But most professionals are no better – they present their credentials, often with mind-numbing detail. They tell you how great they are and their firm is. This bores the daylights out of prospects. If you didn’t have the credentials, you wouldn’t be meeting the prospect. Again, ask questions and treat the pitch as if it’s the first meeting after you’ve been hired. This eliminates the need to pitch.

Imagine how much more successful you will be if you knew in advance what products made the most money for the target client, which were their money-losing products, the target market they wanted to reach and what kind of customers the clients was looking for. How would you find this out?

By asking good questions.