

Writing Your Personal Business Development Plan

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Does the management at your firm simply dress up the lawyers as hunters, send them into the woods and tell them to shoot at anything that moves? Instead, you should practice premeditated business development and make 2008 the best year financially in your career.

Be aware that there are opportunities galore. A recent survey showed that 70% of corporate clients are unhappy with their primary law firm. That's a chance for you to put their business into play.

There are also threats galore out there. Your firm's top 50 clients are the target list for every other law firm, so make sure you are very close with your clients and that they are satisfied with your work.

Your individual sales plan

If you really want to boost the revenue you bring in to your firm by \$75,000 to \$100,000, you must have a *written* plan to devote 100 to 200 hours per year to business development. 100 hours a year is only 2 hours a week, and any lawyer can find that time in meeting a referral source for coffee, taking a client for lunch, or attending a trade association meeting after work.

Your aim is to develop or deepen relationships, because new business comes *in person*. Your plan should be filled with *face-to-face* meetings with clients and targets. The firm's Web site, brochure, articles, newsletters, public relations, direct mail marketing, announcements and press releases will *generate leads* for your sales effort, but you have to go out and *make the sale*.

Keep several things in mind:

- **A sales call is not a pitch.** No one wants to hear about your credentials. A sales call is an *interview* where you are asking questions to learn about the client's business.
- **Don't make any cold calls** because they rarely succeed. Focus on people you already know.

- **Build on your strengths.** If you like to speak in front of a crowd, find a meeting of clients and do so. If instead you are more comfortable one-on-one, then plan dinner parties and private get-togethers where you can talk. Mix business development into your outside activities, hobbies, club memberships and events you enjoy.
- **By making the effort, you have already succeeded.** The key is to change your behavior, not get instant results. Closing a sale takes months of time spent in advance. The more people you know and the more activities you undertake, the better you'll do over the long run.

Elements of your plan

Page one of your individual sales plan should be a list of your top 10 clients. Set a date when you will visit the client at their premises and make plans to get to know as many people there as possible. This is the low hanging fruit: clients already trust you, send you work and mail you checks.

Page two of your plan should be a list of your top 10 referral sources. You need to meet with them in person too – to make certain they know what kind of work you are looking for, and to find out what sort of referrals they want in return.

These two pages are generally enough to fill up a year's worth of sales effort. But you should also write a **page three**, which is a list of targets, executives and general counsel whom you already know – but who are not clients of the firm yet. Your goal is to meet them, strike up a business conversation and discover how your firm can serve them.

Avoid these errors

Finally, avoid making the five biggest selling mistakes:

1. **Talk, rather than listen.** If you hear the sound of your own voice at a sales call, you are making a mistake. Your goal is to ask intelligent questions and get the other person talking. They will tell you about their business issues. All you need to do is listen for an opportunity to help.
2. **Selling your capabilities and expertise.** Sure, you are smart, went to a great law school, got some honors, belong to many bar associations and have a great track record. So what? So do most other lawyers. Clients presume you have good enough credentials or you wouldn't be at the meeting. But getting the sale comes not from *pitching* the target about how great you are, but from *asking questions* about their legal needs, so that you can help them.
3. **Presume instead of ask questions.** Simply because you've done a client's work for 10 years doesn't mean you'll keep it. There could be a new CEO or GC who will bid out all the legal work, including yours. Or a major cost-cutting effort could have started at the client corporation, and it could be aimed at legal costs.

Always inquire about "what's new" at the company and follow up with questions like "tell me more about that" and "what makes you say that?"

4. **Failure to get all the information to win the business.** Your revenues from the client could be increasing, but your "share of wallet" could be going down. Ask the client what their total legal budget is and determine your percentage of it. Ask the client what other law firms they work with and why. Ask the client how the decision is made to hire a law firm. (Your contact may not be the decision maker.)
5. **Missing out on having the client "write the proposal."** If you ask the right questions, the client or target will spell out for you exactly what they want. Back at the office you can have your notes transcribed into a proposal. The trick is to ask the right questions: ask why the legal matter is coming to a head *right now*. Ask what difference this matter makes to the firm's bottom line. Inquire, "if everything worked out perfectly, what would that look like?" Ask, "What have you tried before? Why didn't that work?" Probe, "If the decision were up to you, what would you do?" Ask, "Who's in charge of the project, and tell me about your role in it?" Finally, inquire what other law firms the company is talking to and what the deadline is for choosing a law firm.

If you actually take the time, write the plan and carry it out, 2007 will be the best year financially in your career.