

## “Zipper Up” Your Clients Relationships to Get New Business

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Good relationships with clients lead to new business. Here are of practical steps to help lawyers achieve a good relationship with clients.

First, lawyers need to schedule quarterly meetings with their clients. The topic is simple: How’s business? Don’t talk about the transaction you’re working on currently. What you need to talk about is the *company*.

For example, is the company going to close a plant? If a plant is closing, you have an opportunity. You can say, “That’s really too bad about the plant. Of course, you want to make sure you obey the WARN Act, which requires you to give a certain amount of notice before you lay people off.”

### Action Plan: Step 3

- Quarterly how’s business meeting with key executives
- Two project “to do” lists
  - Work
  - Relationship activities
- Get to know personal interests and ambitions
- “Zipper up” the relationships by peer to peer
- Meet executives outside of the legal department
- Maintain relationships after work is over
- Make introductions for clients to your network



And maybe then the client replies, “That’s good to know, but we’re also opening a new plant in another location.”

You’ve got another opportunity. You can add, “I’m very familiar with that area. I can help you get all the permits that you need and smooth the way through the government process.”

It’s through a discussion of the client’s business that—if you’re paying attention—you’re going to hear all sorts of legal issues. And, clients are just going to love it.

Lawyers tend to have a reputation as being “deal killers” because they’re always telling clients this: “Nope, you can’t do that because of this rule.” If you come across as the person who is there to help the client keep the company going, make it grow, cut costs and make money, *you’ve got a client for life.*

### Two to-do lists

What this means for lawyers is that you have two to-do lists. The first to-do list is the one you currently have for your clients. That’s about producing legal work. That’s billing time. That’s getting the job done.

(Frankly, that’s where the job description ends for associates. Associates are there to bill a lot of hours and learn the law. However, at some point, you’ve got to transform yourself from a worker bee into an owner. Owners go out and get new business.)

That’s where your second to-do list comes in. That second list is about developing relationships. Here’s what you need to do:

- You’ve got to get out in the community.
- You’ve got to have lunch every week with a client or potential client.
- You’ve got to join an organization and take charge of an event.

Of course, if you already have a business relationship with somebody, you have a wonderful opportunity to personalize it.

A great question to ask is this one: **“What do you do for fun?”** Then, once you know what your contacts like to do, you need to provide them with an opportunity to participate in that activity with you. You could do something as routine as a sporting event or even get them those skybox tickets to Jon Bon Jovi when he comes to your city.

First, you want to ask about the favorite activities of the people who work for your client.

A great question to ask is this one: “What do you do for fun?” Then, once you know what your contacts like to do, you need to provide them with an opportunity to participate in that activity with you. You could do something as routine as a sporting event or even get them those skybox tickets to Jon Bon Jovi when he comes to your city.

Second, you need to “zipper up” the relationship. The idea here is that if you’re dealing with the general counsel, you want your other partners to deal with other associated counsel and deputy counsel. You want the associates at your firm to know the client’s executives.

What you want is to have many ties to the client, many people at your law firm who have connections with people who work at the client. It creates a “zippering” effect.

As you know, it’s very hard to tear a zipper apart. The more connections you have with the client—the tighter the relationship—the more likely it is that you’re going to keep the client.

Here’s my quick zipper checklist:

- Make a point of knowing everyone in the legal department of your client.
- Once you do that, ask for introductions to the executives to whom the legal folks report.
- Ask for an introduction to the Chief Financial. After all, he might have work.
- Ask for an introduction to the Human Resources (HR) director because that person is going to be worrying about all sorts of HR matters. Although HR may not be your area of expertise, you can find a legal matter at the client and bring it into your firm.

Bringing legal matters into your firm is what’s popularly known as “cross selling.” Cross selling is the El Dorado of every law firm – long sought after by law firms but very rarely reached.

***The relationship cannot end when the legal matter ends.***

You’ve developed this relationship, good will and a working partnership with a client. Even though that client doesn’t have work for you right now, you need to stay in touch.

The idea is not to let the relationship with your client end. That’s a failing of many lawyers. They’re so task-driven that when they get the task done, they wrap things up and close the file.

That’s a huge mistake from a business development standpoint. You’ve developed this relationship, good will and a working partnership with a client. Even though that client doesn’t have work for you right now, you need to stay in touch.

You need to follow up every quarter. Ask the client out to lunch and find out what’s going on at the company. If they had a legal matter once, chances are good that they’re going to have more legal matters in the future.

Finally, rainmakers tend to see potential connections between their clients.

For example, I was coaching a lawyer in West Virginia. She mentioned that she was working with two different coal companies. These two companies regarded each other as slight competitors.

However, they both had an issue with the state government. This lawyer got both clients together and said, “I know the director of the state EPA, and I can get you an audience. Let me be your advocate, and all three of us will go together. We’ll point out issues that affect your coal companies that are governed by this state EPA.”

Needless to say, the clients were thrilled.

So, introduce your clients to each other. If one client is a real estate developer and you know a real estate investor, it’s obvious what you should do. You should get those two people together.