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A Lawyer Learns How to Ask for the Business

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Like most lawyers, Perry had trouble asking clients and potential clients for their business. “It made me feel like a lawyer vulture, someone who was just trying to line his pockets,” he said.

Now he was sitting across from the owner of a surgical and medical device company who was planning to open a new headquarters in his state. Perry, a partner at a midsized Midwestern law firm, was on a mission to develop new business.

Perry had all the right stuff. He had been a transactional lawyer for 24 years and had worked with many entrepreneurs and companies on the kind of legal issues that arise during the life cycle of a business. At age 48 he had a great reputation, plus a distinguished look from his rimless glasses and streak of gray on his temples.

But something important to business development was missing in this profile. In the past, if a client brought up an upsetting topic and started talking about their problems, he would actually try to change the topic. He wouldn’t ask questions about the client’s business or personal life because he felt he didn’t want to pry. But this diffidence kept him from winning new clients, and undermined his usefulness to existing clients.

During a training session about effective business building, Perry realized he was thinking about this matter all wrong. The mindset he had carried into discussions about client needs was askew. He came to understand that business development was not preying on people when they’re in trouble; in fact, done right, it was really the exact opposite. “When you frame it that you’re trying to *help* someone with a problem, that’s very appealing to me. I want to make sure that my clients are protected and I want to be a problem-solver. It’s natural for me to want to help people,” Perry said.

Perry's new mindset freed him from his natural reservations and he is now originating new files regularly. He recognizes that business development consists of:

1. Meeting people face-to-face. When you go out on a business development call, it should be face-to-face. You don't develop relationships by email or telephone. You don't need to take the firm brochure or anything else with you. However, you must prepare and not "wing it." Visit the other person's website and take note of their latest press releases. Do a Google search on the client's company and find out if they've been in the news. Respect the person you're talking with and do your homework.
2. Building or deepening a relationship.
3. *Interviewing* the other person about their business problems, just as a doctor asks "where does it hurt?"
4. In advance of a meeting, prepare yourself with five good questions to advance the conversation. They're often the same for many situations, though your preparation might uncover more variations more specific to the person you're meeting. And soon you'll be prepared to apply them in any situation. Here are some samples:
 - What has changed since the last time we met?
 - How has that affected you?
 - How are you dealing with the XXXX issue in your industry?
 - How do you think that will affect you in the future?
 - What are the 2-3 things that absolutely **MUST** go right for you to have a good year?
5. When the other person talks about their problems, keep your antennae up for a situation that you can solve with legal services...because the prospect or client truly needs a solution. "I'm a good listener, so that helps a lot," Perry told me.
6. Listen actively, by restating your understanding of the client's problem. *When the other person is talking, you are selling.* Maintain eye contact and don't start digging in your briefcase. Ignore any calls on your cell phone and mute the darn thing – you don't want any distractions. Body language counts: lean forward a little bit and demonstrate physically that you are paying attention. You are about to make some money.
7. When you spot a legal issue (which all lawyers are trained to do from Day One), tell the other person, "I can help you with that." Then explain how, and find out if they want to proceed with the remedy. This is an excellent way to ask for their business.
8. Take the next step and have them come to your office, or make an appointment, so you can sign them as a client. Ask them to deliver any relevant documents to you, "So I can start solving your problem right away." Do not leave the next step in the hands of the other person. You are seeking the legal work, so you must make certain there is a next step. Be sure to have your calendar with you and immediately write down the date when the next step will take place. In reality, this is the essence of good client service.
9. If they have no legal issues, it's not your fault. The other person is simply not a buyer – today. They may be next week. In the meantime you've connected more closely with the other person,

so your time was well spent. In any event, find a way to help the person with their problem by recommending someone they can talk to, a meeting they can attend, or recommend research where they can find an answer.

Perry recalled how he and a partner met an old friend and potential client for lunch. “Things just kind of come up in conversations. I’ve learned to recognize the opportunities and work with the prospect on solutions to their problems. I used to aim not to be pushy, and I’m still not, but I’ve let myself be very, very inquisitive,” he said.

Asking for the business isn’t so hard after all.