

Five critical factors that will increase coaching success  
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According to the 2006 *Law Firm Business Development Practices Survey* published by ALM Research, 69% of large law firms have tried sales training, but few see it as contributing to revenue growth. Sales trainers and coaches in other industries have found that they can increase impact by focusing on five critical factors: motivation, focus, measurement, follow-up, and individual differences. This article will discuss how these factors are being applied in legal business development coaching to increase attorney commitment and improve business results.

## **1. Motivation**

You don't need to be a psychologist to know that motivation is a key to success. But discussions of motivating lawyers to develop new business often get bogged down in debates about compensation, rather than focusing on variables that are easier to control.

In the long run, law firms must change compensation to better reward business development success. However, in the short run this is simply not going to happen at every firm. Therefore, the focus needs to be on other common motivators for job performance, including social reinforcement and group pressure.

Coaches can start by "selling" both financial and non-financial benefits of marketing activity, and explaining how business development can increase personal satisfaction by helping lawyers to find the most interesting clients. As David Maister put it in his book *True Professionalism*: "The better you are at marketing, the better the chance you have to work on fun stuff, and the less trapped you become in being forced to take on work and clients you don't truly enjoy."

However well this message is delivered, some lawyers will simply not respond, and will remain unmotivated. Ignore them. As the cliché says, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

One of the most important factors in the success of any program is the people who are selected to participate. Law firms should always start with the motivated, especially when launching a new program that others will watch to judge how well it works. Once a

pilot group succeeds in bringing in new business, it will be much easier to build upon this initial success.

After the best attorney candidates are selected, the coach must serve not just as an expert guide but also as a cheerleader, to keep people moving forward when they encounter the inevitable obstacles. One way to do this is to use group coaching to provide regular feedback on each individual's activity and results, as described in the measurement section below. The coaching group will appreciate and celebrate success, because they will see for themselves how hard it is to get a meeting or prepare a proposal. And if some lawyers in the group fail to work on business development due to other time demands, the reporting on the group successes will provide adequate peer pressure. Most lawyers are so competitive that simply knowing that others are making gains can be an effective way to increase motivation.

## **2. Focus**

Lawyers have little time for business development. Therefore, it is urgent that they focus the time they do have on the most productive activities. For example, if a lawyer takes a class on how to network, then later fails to actually attend networking events, the program will be a waste on all accounts.

Selling requires follow-up, and coaches have the greatest success encouraging follow-up when they concentrate on the selling activities that each lawyer is most comfortable with. This usually means starting out by coaching them on how to develop the potential for new work within existing clients.

Allowing each lawyer to set his/her own agenda and focusing on the "low hanging fruit" will also increase motivation. Psychologists such as Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin have repeatedly shown that when people have a feeling of control over their environment, they feel better and are more likely to act.

Of course, some lawyers may have trouble identifying the best low hanging fruit. Sales professionals qualify prospects by asking three questions: "Will they buy?", "Will they buy now?", and "Will they buy from me?" This type of thinking is often foreign to lawyers, who may be tempted to select prospects based on a variety of irrelevant criteria.

A diplomatic coach can help guide lawyers to the prospects that are most likely to lead to significant new engagements. But the key word in that sentence is "diplomatic." Lawyers are highly intelligent people who are trained to be critical. Most respond negatively to overt pressure. So the coach's job is to gently try to convince them to pursue the largest and most likely prospects. If that doesn't work, one must "go with the flow," and help lawyers to pursue the clients they care about. If it produces results, it will prove the lawyer was right. And if it doesn't, you will now have the evidence to turn attention to better prospects.

### 3. Measurement

As management guru Tom Peters put it: “What gets measured gets done.” In every program to change behavior, coaches and therapists measure activity and results. Dieters track their calorie intake and weight. People who want to become more fit track the time they spend exercising. People with money problems track their budgets. People with medical complaints track their symptoms.

In a recent survey of 377 marketing professionals, Suzanne Lowe and Larry Bodine found that “Professional firms that said they were extremely effective [in developing new business] used three particular client-focused metrics in combination with each other. . . : a) Growing client revenue: ‘Did you grow revenue with your client or not?’ b) Moving the phases of a sale through a pipeline: ‘Did you close the sale or not?’ and c) Listening to the client: ‘Did you listen to your client or not?’”

As explained in my book *Legal Business Development: A Step by Step Guide*, in addition to these three variables law firms should also consider such measures as time spent, advances, meetings, market share, referrals, client satisfaction, and more. The precise measures to be used in each coaching program will be based on each firm’s goals and culture. What the best measures have in common is simplicity, so that something will in fact be counted consistently and followed up.

### 4. Follow-up

Attorneys have many good reasons for failing to follow up on the advice from business development coaches and trainers, starting with heavy case loads that constantly compete for their time. No business development program can succeed if lawyers fail to follow up.

This is a never-ending battle. One of the greatest contributions of any coach is simply to ensure that things get done. In my work with lawyers, I focus on Neil Rackham’s concept of sales “advances” based on his studies of more than 35,000 sales calls in a variety of professions over twelve years. In *SPIN Selling*, Rackham defines an advance as “A specific action taken by either party that moves the sale forward,” such as scheduling another meeting, getting introduced to someone new, or providing a list of references.

Great salespeople succeed by planning every sales call, and successfully strategizing how to get the largest possible advance. Rackham’s *SPIN Selling Fieldbook* provides examples and guidance of how to brainstorm possible advances before a meeting, and then select the one that is likely to lead to the greatest progress. This takes effort and practice. But it may be the difference between success and failure.

To increase follow-up, coaches can provide weekly reports of the advances and results for each person in the business development group. This creates accountability and a

subtle group pressure; no one wants to see a report with a string of zeroes next to their name.

## **5. Individual Differences**

The field of differential psychology focuses on the many differences that make each of us unique, including personality traits, values, motivation, and learning styles. The best coaching programs must be designed to build on these individual differences.

The book *Discover Your Sales Strengths* summarizes 40 years of research by the Gallup organization on why some people succeed at sales, and some do not. Based on interviews with over 250,000 sales professionals, they have concluded that the most successful sales people learn how to apply their personal strengths to develop successful selling tactics.

There are many many ways to sell. But lawyers don't have time to learn them all. If an individual finds a particular task difficult or distasteful, they should focus their limited business development efforts on something else. Each individual must specialize in what they do best. An effective coach can accommodate personal differences and individual needs by helping each person to identify their personal key strengths.

In recent decades, sales professionals have made significant advances in refining training and coaching techniques. Legal business development professionals can increase their success by applying the lessons learned in other industries – starting with these five critical success factors.

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