

Good marketing all about the client, not the lawyer

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Seller's Market offers practitioners information about marketing their skills and services as attorneys. This week, reporter Barbara Rabinowitz talks shop with James Hassett, president of LegalBizDev of Burlington, who advises lawyers on, not surprisingly, how to develop their legal business.

Q. (Barbara Rabinowitz) *I understand you have a background in sales training. What sales techniques can a lawyer apply when marketing a law practice and/or a law firm?*

A. (James Hassett) There are millions, but I think that probably the most important thing is learning to focus their marketing time on the activities that are most likely to pay off. So many lawyers think that marketing is going to networking meetings, and that's good if you're good at it. But a lot of lawyers are not good at it, and so, frankly, it's a waste of time.

The single thing lawyers need to do most is focus first on current clients. ... A lot of times new business is "wallet share," as lawyers call it, from your current clients. Additional business from the same people, referrals from those people to their friends — those things are so much more effective.

Q. *Do those techniques differ from what we know as "rainmaking"?*

A. They do, and they don't. At one level, business development is exactly equal to traditional rainmaking, [which is] trying to do anything you can think of to bring in new business. But on another level, rainmaking is changing because the legal profession is changing. ...

One technique that salespeople use all the time is to visit their clients and ask them about their business and what are their business challenges. They don't try and sell; they just listen. When they do, they often uncover new needs that lead to new sales.

Q. *How does a lawyer tailor the marketing effort to the potential client?*

A. I think it's about the person, the client; you have to understand what the person wants or needs. It's certainly not about saying, "I can do this for you, I can do that for you."

Q. *How much time should a lawyer devote to business development, and should it be a formalized process?*

A. I believe absolutely it should be formalized, because you need to track it to make sure you're doing enough. ... For most people, an hour per week is enough if what you're doing is building stronger relationships with the people you already know — both clients and referral sources. That's the recommended minimum. But if your goal is to get new clients, it's got to be at least three hours.

Q. *If a lawyer fails to hear back from the would-be client, should there be follow-up? And how much follow-up is too much?*

A. That's a classic problem for salespeople as well. You tell them, "I don't want to be a pest, but I do want to follow up with you." It's Human Relationships 101 — being sensitive to the differences between different clients and knowing that one person wants to be asked by e-mail, another by phone and another not at all.

Q. *Do lawyers whom you coach ever express a discomfort about marketing themselves and their practices?*

A. I have heard lawyers say, "It's unprofessional; it's not why I became a lawyer." There are two answers to that. One is: Get over it because some self-promotion is necessary. A second, almost contradictory answer is: If you feel uncomfortable, you may be doing too much thinking about yourself and not enough about the client. You should be listening, not talking.

Q. *Is business development best handled by outside marketing specialists rather than by lawyers themselves?*

A. Experts disagree wildly about that. I believe it must be handled by the lawyer [and] can only be handled by the lawyer. Outsiders can help you figure out how to do it, but clients are making their buying decisions based on human relationships with trusted advisers, and you can't delegate that.