

The Most Important Difference in Legal Selling: Time



by Jim Hassett

Just about everyone agrees that selling legal services is different from selling used cars, and even from selling other professional services. But exactly what is different? And why does it matter?

When I first started working with lawyers, I thought that personality and temperament were the most important differences. In the 20 years I spent training and coaching professional salespeople in financial services and other industries, I don't remember a single salesperson ever arguing with me. Notice I did not say that they always agreed with me, just that they never argued. When there was a difference of opinion, they ignored it, smiled and moved on.

In contrast, when I started selling to lawyers, it was hard to get through the first 10 minutes of a talk without someone interrupting to challenge my conclusions or cross-question me about the underlying evidence. The experience gave me flashbacks to my days in academia, where arguing is a valued skill, and it is a matter of honor to challenge every assertion.

To some professors, there's nothing quite as satisfying as asking a pointed question that brings a colloquium speaker to his intellectual knees. That approach may be fine when you are debating the law, but every sales guru from Dale Carnegie to Larry Wilson will tell you that people who sell shouldn't argue.

Just a Little Better

Then something happened that made me think there was another, more important difference. I offered a public workshop in which lawyers reviewed business-development best practices, and picked the action items which they thought would have the greatest impact for their practice, their personality and their schedule. I followed up over the next several weeks, to monitor their results.

One of the lawyers who attended my first work-

shop—a senior partner at a 400-lawyer firm—decided to offer a long-time client a free meeting, to learn more about the client's business. The client's first reaction was skepticism; he asked whether he would be billed for meeting preparation, research or follow up. Once the client was convinced that the meeting would really be free, he became quite enthusiastic and suggested a list of additional people who should be invited. When the lawyer from my workshop called these new contacts, he got chatting with one person, who said "By the way, did you know that we are about to assign a significant litigation to one of your competitors?" "No, I didn't," the lawyer replied. "Why don't I bring over one of our litigators this afternoon to see if we could help." The end result was that his firm earned a significant litigation, before he even got to the free meeting.

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I was stunned. In all the years I had trained and coached sales people in insurance, banking and financial services, I never heard a single story of such an easy sale. Would you buy a large insurance policy because your agent agreed to meet with you for free? This event, and others like it, convinced me that the biggest difference in legal selling was not lawyers' personalities after all, it was the competitive environment.

To win at selling, you just need to be a little better than your competitors. For lawyers, many of those competitors had no selling skills at all. Even the most basic actions could have an enormous impact. No doubt, this is temporary. After sophisticated selling techniques are adopted throughout the profession, we will look back on this time with a bemused fondness,

and tell each other stories about the good old days when a lawyer could get a significant litigation just by offering a free meeting. But for now, almost any sensible sales advice will work at least some of the time.

But as I continued to work with more and more lawyers, a funny thing happened. I noticed that no matter how much success they had, almost none of the lawyers I worked with followed up as consistently as they should. Which led me to my third and final answer: The most important difference in legal selling is time. Some lawyers are so busy that they don't even want new business, and the rest are too busy to maximize results.

The financial sales people I had coached spent 60 to 80 hours per week living, breathing and acting on sales. The lawyers I work with these days struggle to find two or three hours per week that they can devote to business development on a consistent and predictable basis.

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This has many implications. The most important one is that to maximize success, lawyers must prioritize relentlessly. What is good advice for a sales person may be bad advice for a lawyer. If a lawyer only has two or three hours per week, she must focus strictly on the individual activities that are most likely to produce results for her practice, her personality and her schedule.

For example, before a lawyer decides whether to attend a networking meeting, she should realistically assess how

many hours it will require, including preparing, following up and even driving to and from the meeting. Suppose a particular networking meeting requires an investment of five hours. She must then ask whether the meeting is the best possible way to spend that time. Would five hours be likely to produce greater results if she instead offered a free meeting to a current client to understand what the client values most about current services, and what could be improved? What about sending personalized e-mails to 20 people she already knows, just to stay top of mind? Or re-establishing contact with a few friends from law school who now work for large corporations?

Or consider your firm's last marketing event. What was its impact on new business? Could you have achieved greater results if all that time and money had been used differently? Suppose that you outlined a step-by-step sales program to build relationships with a short list of decision makers and/or industry gurus. Or suppose you had redirected those resources to support individual meetings with people the lawyers already knew, focused on broadening contacts in a particular industry segment. Would the results have been greater?

Of course, business developers in every profession ask questions like these every day. What's different about working with lawyers is that we must ask them more frequently and more rigorously, because lawyers have so little time. ■

Jim Hassett is the author of "Legal Business Development: A Step by Step Guide." He can be reached at 781/270-0642 or jhassett@legalbizdev.com.