THE**RECORDER**

Tangible Tactics to Grow Client Relationships

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By **Lauren Piccolo-Ingram and Vanessa Torres |** March 04, 2020

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This is the latest in a monthly series of The Marketing Department, where Legal Marketing Association members get candid about growing your practice and raising your profile. Check back in the months ahead for the latest developments in PR/communications, business development, client relations, technology and other areas.

As law firm business development professionals, we spend a lot of time talking with the attorneys we support about how to grow their business with specific clients. Why so much time on this topic? As the adage goes, 80% of one's business comes from just 20% of one's clients. Therefore, time spent thinking about and planning how to grow business with a small selection of critical clients is time well spent. This article summarizes key steps in the client development process.

Set Goals. Make A Plan.

In today's numbers-driven world, lawyers often think about client development goals as simply obtaining a certain amount of revenue from clients. While setting a revenue target is great, it is important to think through the steps to reach that revenue number, as well as a client's business and legal needs. For the sake of accountability and assessing progress, committing those steps to writing is also important.

If the client's legal needs and the best opportunities for new work are outside of your area, your planning may include introducing colleagues from different practice areas or geographies. For example, if you recently helped a client with a significant acquisition, perhaps streamlining its workforce is something the client is considering. Introducing an employment law practitioner will show your client you are keeping their needs in mind.

Having tactical steps makes assessing one's client development progress easier—and can help keep you motivated. As we all know, the business development process is lengthy and requires many touch points with a client. Keep yourself committed to the steps in your plan and the revenue should follow.

Know the Client.

We hear time and again that clients want us to "know their business." Staying abreast of a client's business can be hard, particularly if you are targeting a large corporation. Luckily, technology make things a bit easier for us here.

Law firm library and research teams can employ market intelligence tools to establish customized news alerts on your client. These alerts can pull news from the sources of your choosing and deliver alerts at your desired frequency. This is a great way to maintain awareness of your client's business and start to understand their needs.

We also suggest following, and engaging with, your clients (both companies and individual contacts) on LinkedIn or other social media channels that they may be using. Because of the real-time nature of social media, we often learn about important developments from social media channels before we learn of those developments through other sources.

Lastly, for public company clients, listening to earnings or investor relations calls can be helpful. In a recent effort that we were involved in with our intellectual property practice, we learned through the transcript of a client's earnings call a great detail about a client's product and how it planned to monetize it. This information was invaluable to informing a pitch response and helped us to progress to the next stage in the selection of outside counsel. Many companies host these meetings via webinar and record the meetings and post them to their websites.

Take Stock of Relationships.

In professional services, relationships are everything. Not knowing all of your client's stakeholders and decision-makers may impede in getting new work.

Develop an organizational chart for relevant areas of your client's business. It's important to understand both who is making decisions and who is influencing decisions on the selection of outside counsel. In addition to in-house legal teams, we are seeing an increase in the number of legal operations professionals, be they chief legal operating officers or heads of procurement, who are involved in the outside counsel selection process.

Once relevant business areas are mapped out, identify stakeholders whom you do not know. If you have an excellent relationship with the in-house counsel overseeing employment law issues, but not the head of litigation, for example, indicate that you would like to bring the head of litigation from your firm to a meet your contact. This often prompts a client to include others on their side as well.

Simply asking for an introduction to relevant contacts works too.

Maintaining Relationships.

The most basic facet of growing and maintaining client relationships is simply having face-to-face interactions.

Ensure that you are leveraging all of the thought leadership event offerings that your firm provides for personal client outreach. In my experience, clients are far more likely to accept an invitation to a firm event if the invitation is extended from a lawyer personally versus through a firm's mass email distribution. If you have a large network of contacts, it can be overwhelming to personally invite everyone you know to whom an event is relevant. If that is the case, prioritize personal outreaches to the clients on which you are most focused.

Think broadly about the types of events to which you invite clients. We have seen partners have much success in engaging clients in the firm's diversity and pro bono initiatives or in their activities with nonprofits unrelated to the firm. Knowing your client and which, if any, of these items may be important to them is key.

Get Feedback.

Nothing beats a client's candid feedback—particularly if you are not getting as much business as you would like.

In a recent survey conducted by Goodwin, we asked clients what percentage of law firms have a formal system for collecting feedback and whether clients would like more of their law firms to solicit regular feedback. Clients reported that only 18% of their law firms have a system for collecting feedback but 80% of clients desired to have their feedback sought. Therefore, asking for feedback may be a good way to differentiate oneself that can help in client development efforts.

Many firms have systems and processes in place to collect feedback on some level, whether through post-matter surveys or broader relationship assessment interviews. Having someone unrelated to the client, like a business development professional, conduct the feedback interview allows for candor. Avail yourself of these services if your firm is providing them. If you are unsure what your firm offers, check with your business development team.

If your firm has not yet deployed a client feedback process, you can ask your client for feedback independently. Think through the items on which you would like feedback and construct a strong question set. You may want to provide the questions in advance so the client has time to consider their responses. Of course, if the client offers areas for improvement, respond openly and professionally.

Once you have feedback from your client, it's critical to make any necessary adjustments. This demonstrates that you listen to and prioritize servicing your client.

Get Help.

Developing a client relations plan and then executing on that plan by knowing your client's business, developing and maintaining relationships and gathering feedback is work. Reach out to your business development team for help.

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