



BY HEATHER SUTTIE

Sales Glue

Market erosion and survival of the innovative means adopting a sales culture

LAST FALL, I attended a seminar on legal-services procurement that dealt with the topic of sales. Of the 49 attendees, there were four partners, three pricing managers and 42 business-development professionals — further proof that lawyers either don't understand the value of sales or don't want to.

Given the dire need to maintain current work levels (never mind finding more work) the five-letter word that seems to have a four-letter connotation, “sales,” is one that lawyers would be wise to add to their lexicon and adopt into their culture.

Seminar panelist Vincent Cordo, former global director of client value at Reed Smith LLP, with similar experience at two global law firms, has a laser-like focus on sales. Cordo, who now uses his pricing and procurement skills as Global Sourcing Officer for Shell observed that, in many cases, there is “no sales glue” between a firm's marketing and business-development people and its lawyers, and that this disconnect results in revenue leakage for a firm.

He's right. Actually, there's a gaping divide, because lawyers aren't generally good at sales and law firm business-development people are rarely directly involved in sales, which culminates in leakage levels that border on hemorrhage. This is why law firms need to adopt a sales culture fast if they want to remain solvent.

LAWYERS DON'T KNOW BEANS

Professional-services firms, especially the Big Four auditors, adopted a sales mentality over 20 years ago when they twigged that accountants aren't natural salespeople. Like accountants, lawyers say they didn't go to school to learn how to sell, and they're right, which is why many haven't a clue how to do it and would rather eat ground glass than have to learn.



Steve Bell is Chief Sales & Marketing Officer with Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice LLP, a law firm based in North Carolina. He says Womble Carlyle was already successful at sales even before a formal sales function was created. Now, even though the firm's salespeople have sometimes singlehandedly transformed prospects into clients, he says that “client service largely is the province of lawyers.”

And that “relationships initiated and advanced by salespeople should be transferred to lawyers as quickly as possible.” As Bell says, “Client developers can move on to the creation of new relationships. Lawyers can deliver extraordinary client service.”

While Womble Carlyle's salespeople have come from banking, accounting and university development, the firm isn't organized by sector. But Bell says, “It seems like a great idea to have professionals who are deep in a specific industry.”

ACCOUNTANTS KNOW BEANS

Professional-services firms not only adopted a sales culture two decades ago, they also organized by industry. Robert Osborne is General Counsel and a partner with PwC in Canada. He says, “The firm's salespeople are predominantly aligned to our industry and segment teams, although there are some product salespeople in some of our niche solution areas.”

Thanks to industry alignment, PwC is able to attract top performers with deep

sector expertise. Osborne says, “It ensures that the business-development group has the depth of knowledge, relationships and experience they need to fully understand our clients' business, and further establish our leadership within the various industries they support.”

This is why accounting firms know beans and law firms have yet to know beans when the bag's open. The Big Four have industry alignment and sales cultures down to a science. Having added legal components to their service offerings, these global goliaths with their big brands and bigger bucks have fast become a major threat to traditional law firms worldwide.

As dire as that may sound, there is still a chance that, if law firms can adopt the proper sales mentality, they may just yet have a hope of being around 20 years from now. After all, salespeople can learn about legal services just as they've learned about accounting and other professional services. And one of the best features of the relationship between the sales and service professionals is that it's church-and-state. Salespeople at professional-services firms can't and won't do your taxes any more than salespeople at law firms can or will handle litigation.

As Womble Carlyle's Bell says, “To be crass, sales is sales ... especially when it is consultative sales. Whoever is doing the selling just needs to listen and understand, and be a portal to relationships. It can be a lawyer, a sales professional, a marketing professional, a director of administration or a receptionist.”

Proof positive that sales is basic. And it's strikingly effective when the whole firm is the sales department. ☐

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