

When sales becomes value

Securing more legal work is best taken in small steps, and by thinking and acting like a farmer rather than a hunter

THERE'S A peculiar notion within traditional law firms that when you become an equity partner, a switch is flipped from doing the work to getting the work. But if this transition was as dramatic as it sounds, you wouldn't survive long enough to partake in the partnership draw.

This is why developing a sales mentality that evolves into a value culture is a long-term undertaking.

Sales methodology involves hardcore factors such as data mining, information sorting and market targeting, balanced by soft skills that include active listening, thoughtful communication and client care. This process must be supported by repetition, perseverance and patience. A sense of humour and the ridiculous helps, too.

Selling legal services is not a job for the faint of heart and often not the best job for a lawyer. That said, for partners who are not naturally adept at sales, gleaning more files from current clients and securing work from new clients is best taken in small steps.

A Big Four sales culture

Years ago I managed EY's Entrepreneur of the Year program in Canada, which was known as the firm's number-one sales driver. The program was created when EY adopted a sales culture in the mid-1990s. This was when the accountants and consultants who, like lawyers, did not go to school to learn to sell their services, embraced a sales culture that was clients-first and industry-focused. Led by sales professionals, it was supported by sophisticated teams, tools and systems.

Partners who were active during the sales culture's early years credit it with saving the firm and making them more money than they ever imagined. After 30 years, the sales culture has morphed into a value culture. This enables partners to focus on high-value matters and current clients as well as engage with qualified new ones — all of whom are nurtured throughout the sales process — while shuttling commodity work to internal service teams. It also affords investment in EY's people and infrastructure, which results in solid returns.

Stop hunting

While lawyers don't usually snag clients with butterfly nets or by grabbing jacket lapels, I've overhead cringeworthy questions from the former to the latter, such as "Who does your legal work?" or the more direct "How do we get your legal work?", as an opening salvo to a dead-end conversation. With no graceful recovery from such an awkward opener, the now not-in-this-lifetime client dashes away wishing their wingtips could help them run faster.

The term "getting clients" is overly aggressive, even though it has been used in the legal market forever. Perhaps, for those inclined to overcompensate for reasons of shyness, insecurity or the like, it may instill authority. For clients, it implies being hunted.

This is why such clients may bridle against classic "hunting" methods such as golf dates, hockey tickets, or even being taken to lunch.

"Getting clients" fails because nobody wants to be got.

Be a farmer

Farmers are methodical, diligent, resourceful and patient. They don't salivate at the thrill of the chase, but instead are sensitive to developments and changes in market conditions and adjust their actions and timing to deliver as expected.

Just as a farmer does, successful selling means seeding and weeding your target market, and developing business among contacts who respond to attention.

This is the core of legal market strategy. Next steps include marketing, which entails executing on key tactics that underpin market strategy. Business development happens when marketing activities enable two-way connections with those who may need your assistance now or in the future. And client retention embodies the nurturing of a relationship that, over time, grows to where trust earned continuously enables a strong bond.

Maturing to value

Rainmakers are fallacies. "Rainmaker" implies a mystic aura around someone who creates wealth through their seemingly magical ability to connect with others. Rainmakers do not exist, any more than do tooth fairies.

Instead, there are people who, by nature or study, have an ability to frame their uniqueness as value. They are often observant and contemplative. They listen more than they speak. When they speak, they say little, but their words matter.

Their confidence comes from a sense of self that is rooted in a maturity that has nothing to do with age. Instead, it stems from a concentration on and consideration of how they or others can improve another person's situation.

This is when sales crystalizes into value. And when that happens, it's magic. **CL**

Heather Suttie consults on legal markets, marketing management, business development and client retention. She advises law firms and legal service providers ranging from global to solo and Big Law to New Law. Reach her at 416.964.9607 or www.heathersuttie.ca.

