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# Winning Business

By **Jack Downton**

As the UK enters what analysts predict will be a long and punishing recession, winning business is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the life of an accountant. With competition for business increasing, and clients becoming more and more selective of the firms they choose to do business with, being able to successfully generate business is paramount to the day to day workings of accountants in 2008 – and beyond.

Firms therefore need to ensure that their accountants are capitalising on new business opportunities in every way possible, from networking at corporate events to presenting themselves in the right way at meetings to win business.

## Winning the business

Meetings with clients and potential clients to discuss the services you offer are perhaps the most important, direct way to generate new business for your company.

Selling business, however, is an area that many professionals, accountants in particular, have trouble with. All too often, in my training, I've seen accountants try to communicate far too much information with potential clients and "sell". However, by changing the way they view the process by gaining an understanding of the clients' experience, they vastly improve their chances of winning.

## Opening

It is important to lay as much ground work as possible before any pitches. As accountancy is a service you want to sell, as opposed to a product like stationery or bottled water, rapport between buyer and seller is particularly important as they are buying into people. Therefore try to build your relationships long before you pitch for business. When you do open your pitch, establish who you are and why you are there and ask them how they would like to proceed; if they have no preference, offer your agenda.

All too often, accountants fail to present themselves as a team. This is worsened when the leader introduces 'his team'. The team ought to introduce themselves. Sellers must appear united, as opposed to fragmented, single accountants and no one person should shine and take the limelight.

When introducing yourself, instead of simply listing what you do and the features therein, explain why you are relevant to the client and what you specifically can offer them.

## Investigating

The most important thing accountants should do is explore their clients' issues. Yet during my training, when I ask my clients which part of the pitch is the most important, they rarely give enough consideration to the importance of this stage – in my mind, the most important. This has much more impact than simply stating what services you offer. Questions are much more powerful than merely reeling off facts about your company and its people. By asking questions, the client feels listened to, rather than sold to. By finding out what is important for the client, you learn, they learn and they take away with them the feeling that you are interested in them. Those accountants who strike at the first sign of interest should hold back and find out more about what their clients really wants, as they are unlikely to be ready to buy just yet.

You should also bear in mind the 'So what?' question. It might be impressive that your firm is in the top ten accountancy firms in the UK, and that you have just opened a bureau in Dubai but does this have any relevance to the current needs of the client?

If possible, a short visit or phone call before the meeting to find out more about your clients' needs is often a useful way to focus your pitch on their expectations and requirements of you. By talking through in advance what they are looking for on key issues, your pitch will address their concerns directly and will enable you to present around what they are looking for as opposed to what you think they want. If you sell on assumptions, you are likely to get objections.

Appearing interested and showing that you have a genuine interest and care for your client will also differentiate your team.

### **Don't strike too early**

In addition to pouncing at the first sign of client interest, another common mistake is not listening to what they say and doggedly pursuing your own agenda. Therefore, bite your tongue and listen and use what you hear to inform your next question and keep on doing it until your questioning has developed the client's perception sufficiently to want what you offer. The result is a client who sees you as interested. He learns, you learn and you have built value into your proposition. Price, therefore, becomes less of an issue.

My experience of training accountants has taught me that when they are shown recorded video excerpts from their own meetings, more often than not the overall feeling is that they shouldn't be selling in such a direct way. Instead, they should be focusing on attracting the client by exploring and asking questions to learn more about what their client really wants. They need to establish that vital, initial rapport and be seen as a team that would be good to work with.

### **Demonstrating your capability**

Your credentials will probably be looked over in the documents you have prepared. These documents however are often far too detailed, are confusing, contain too much irrelevant information and are for the most part skimmed rather than read. They should therefore be kept to a maximum of 10 pages and be tightly tailored to meet what the client needs and wants.

In your document, you should include a few examples of previous experience that will benefit your potential client and in the presentation itself, freely illustrate how you overcame challenges and focus on the benefits you can bring the client rather than on the features of your services.

## **Closing**

You are seeking commitment from your client at the end of your pitch so don't be afraid of saying that you would really like to work with them on this project. Remember above all that this is not just an opportunity to close a deal, but also to open a relationship.

Jack's Checklist:

- Only sell what you need to sell, i.e. yourselves.
- Start by placing your agenda on the side and asking questions of the client, letting their answers inform the next question.
- Beware of technology. Computer presentations, for example, can be a barrier to connecting with your client.
- Keep your presentation brief. Allocate 75% of available time for Q & A.
- When pitching as a team, work as a team.
- The team leader should not dominate but show off the team.
- Listen more than you talk. The more the client talks, the more you learn and the better s/he feels. Listen really carefully and show you are listening.
- Use illustrations of how you have helped clients to enliven the proposition.

And finally, your aim ought to be to leave the client feeling really good about meeting you and positive about doing business with you in the future. Ultimately, pitches should be made as simple as possible, so keep ideas and sentences straightforward, without undervaluing your team, and remembering the words of Albert Einstein: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

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