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## **Too clever for their own good: Turning cold contacts into new business**

Written by **Jack Downton**

With fears of Europe slipping back into recession, lawyers' ability to win new business has never been more crucial. Clients are becoming increasingly selective of who they do business with, and competition has intensified dramatically. As a result, networking and pitching are now central to the life of many lawyers, so it is surprising how many still struggle with talking to strangers.

When it comes to generating leads and selling business, the trouble with most lawyers is their technical excellence. While all the lawyers I train are good at their jobs, they seem unable to remove themselves from their role as a 'lawyer'. They communicate too much information, using complex legal principles and esoteric details, and in reality these are not what potential clients are interested in.

Whether networking or pitching, lawyers should remember that potential clients will be looking to purchase a relationship; law is a service, not a product, so they will be 'buying' the lawyer, as well as the skills they can offer.

As a lawyer, your competence is largely given. Focus instead on building personal rather than purely professional relationships when networking, and during a pitch keep technical skills interesting to the potential client by always making it relevant to them.

### **Building your network**

Lawyers are often surprised to learn that preparation is essential for effective networking. 'Blindly' going to a networking event will mean standing in a corner alone, but a bit of planning can lead to leaving with a respectable number of business cards. Give some thought to why you are going, what you want to achieve and in particular, the people (or the type of person) to target.

Upon arrival, and after scoping out a suitable group of people to join, it is best to begin by approaching the member of the group that seems to be leading the conversation. Hesitation or shyness will work against you – make direct eye contact, offer your hand, introduce yourself and smile. Along with maintaining eye contact, it's useful to tactfully (but sparingly) address the person by name to establish a deeper connection and to help remember their name. People will feel a genuine interest in them as a person, and not just as a business prospect.

Finally, it is important not to dominate the conversation. This surprises lawyers, who often think that controlling conversations will demonstrate expertise and leadership. Being a successful networker does not involve constantly being the centre of attention or delighting your audience with witty anecdotes.

A technique seasoned networkers employ is allowing other people in the group to have greater speaking parts, making targets feel important without the risk of boring them, and leaving a good final impression.

## **Pitching for business**

When preparing for a business pitch, many lawyers forget to scope out the competition, focusing all their resources on researching the prospective client instead. Finding information on prospective clients should take up the bulk of preparation time, but it is essential to also have a clear idea of competitors.

When pitching, teams of lawyers often appear fragmented, and having the leader introducing 'his team' makes this worse. It is important to present a united front – all team members should introduce themselves and instead of just listing job and role titles, explain explicitly their relevance to the client and what they specifically can offer.

Remember not to just reel off facts about the firm. Understandably, the legal industry in particular places a high focus on details such as firm rankings in tables, the locations of international offices, the number of partners, etc. But how does this relate directly to the client's business in hand?

It is more powerful to ask questions, as the prospective client feels listened to rather than 'sold' to. Clients want to know that lawyers are genuinely interested – if this can be shown, then value will automatically be built into propositions.

Whether you're pitching or networking, according to Nadine Herrmann, an associate I trained in winning business at Allen & Overy: "It came out very clearly how important it is to listen to what potential clients have to say." This leaves the client anticipating further meetings, and eager to work together in the future.

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