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In with the old

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By **Deane Hitchens-Orr**

Deane Hitchens-Orr explains the benefits of 'selling on' to existing clients, and reveals how to make the most of these well-established relationships

Solicitors' practices have long been considered robust entities; however, in light of the current economic turmoil, many law firms are under financial pressures and many solicitors' practices are vulnerable.

There are a number of ways to sustain revenue streams in tough economic times from cutting costs to increasing prices and attracting more clients. Yet, from the amount it costs to attract new clients in terms of marketing, time spent and sheer effort, it is clear that the best prospects lie in developing opportunities from relationships with existing clients.

Up to 70 per cent of business comes from retaining and developing opportunities with current clients, and so many lawyers may be missing a trick: the opportunity to 'sell-on' to clients with whom they have existing relationships.

Clients buy services from you and your law firm when they know how you can help them. That's why they initially contracted you – but once you've signed up a new client, don't assume that they understand the range of services you offer. All too often law firms wait for their clients to approach them about additional service needs, rather than seek out client's needs proactively. The very nature of having existing clients means that you are best placed to capitalise on the relationship you already have with them to 'sell-on'. You've established your credibility and the value of at least one of your services your client has already committed to buy, so why not leverage that trust and client satisfaction into additional sales streams?

Of course, you don't want to be constantly 'selling on'. However, changes in litigation, personal injury and intellectual property law to name but a few impact a firm's approach to better fit with the level of service that different clients demand.

This means it is imperative that practices continue to educate clients about these changes and help them understand the issues, problems and solutions relative to your area of practice expertise.

So, how do you spot these sales opportunities and make the most of those well-established relationships?

Getting your approach right

Success in cross-selling involves grasping the concept of good selling, and why bad selling puts people off. First, we need to understand the skills and behaviours that contribute to sales excellence to develop the right mindset. Asking the right questions and listening to the client are essential. All too often, when selling services, lawyers talk over a client: being passionate and a subject matter expert can be just as damaging as a lack of confidence and poor product knowledge. Instead, lawyers should deploy that knowledge and passion in a consultative approach, scoping the client's needs in a way that favours you. It is the difference between being 'client-centric' and 'seller-centric'.

Developing an opportunity

How can you spot and qualify what the clients' drivers are? For most clients facing the turmoil of the last 18 months, the issues that are driving them are centered on areas such as strategy and planning, mergers and acquisitions, banks and money, their people and their clients. When exploring with clients the 'why change?' balance, we need to recognise the difference between the issues that 'pain' the client versus the 'gain' of contracting with your firm.

The reason being is that just like in our personal lives we learn to live with elements that we are not 100 per cent happy with; clients in organisations are no different. Why? Well, sometimes they don't recognise that a problem exists; sometimes they don't realise the value of a solution or even if there is one available. This is why, when 'selling-on', incumbent lawyers are well placed to sell their services into the next opportunity.

Conducting good sales conversations

Adopting the right language will legitimise your conversations with your clients. Selling is nothing more than the stylised art of influencing – something many solicitors are great at. It is often assumed that 'open' questions are the key to unlocking a dialogue with clients, but it is the purpose and the timing of the question that has the strongest impact. A subtle change of a word can also have a profound impact on the discussions you have with your clients.

Whether seeking the client's concerns or creating value for your proposition, it is your ability to challenge the client's thinking that can add real value and that entails knowing what impact language has on the question. While using 'open' questions is important, doing this in a more consultative manner is even more significant.

You also need to be able to tell that someone is genuinely listening; it is less about the verbal nods and more about your ability to demonstrate an understanding of the client's position along with the coherence and continuity of the questions you are asking. This indicates clearly whether the conversation is genuinely client-centric or not.

Being persuasive

Work with clients to establish the benefits of why your client should instruct you on this piece of work. A lawyer once asked me: "This is all very well and good but what's the end game?" The answer: it's all about being able to talk about your solution in the most persuasive manner possible and that means being able to make 'benefit' statements. These are

describing what it is that your solution can do in order to achieve the ‘gain’ clients are looking for.

The mistake so many lawyers make when presenting their proposition is to fail to match the client’s requirements. Most lawyers are both knowledgeable and passionate about what their solution can potentially do for clients. But ‘potentially’ isn’t the same as ‘actually’ and the risk is they mismatch their solution to the client’s requirements. It is the difference between selling and telling.

Postscript:

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