

COACHING LAWYERS TO EMBRACE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND MARKETING

By Gina Sauer and Kari Jensen Thomas





In our previous article, “Empowering Your Emerging Leaders: The 5 Essential Skills Your Attorneys Need Next,” (*NALP Bulletin+*, November 2022), we discussed training as a key element in a robust business development curriculum. Group training can certainly be effective, but with a skill set so inherently tied to the unique style and circumstances of each lawyer, business development is an area where highly individualized coaching is arguably even more important and impactful. To create a successful coaching curriculum, it is essential to first understand why most lawyers are hesitant about business development, and then address and overcome their aversion — and build their skills — through a system we call BARBARA.

Why Many Lawyers Balk at Business Development

First, let’s look at the underlying reasons why many lawyers resist business development education and activities. Ask most lawyers and they will tell you they did not go to law school intending to become successful in sales and marketing. In fact, many of the more senior lawyers practicing today were taught in their law

school professional responsibility courses that marketing or advertising their practice was prohibited. The landscape has changed significantly and the ability to sell legal services, develop business, and actively solicit clients are skills lawyers must now embrace. So why do they so often resist this truth?

The lawyer personality is unique, as researched and summarized by Dr. Larry Richard in his article, “Herding Cats: The Lawyer Personality Revealed” (*Report to Legal Management*, Altman Weil, Volume 29, Number 11, August 2002). In fact, according to Dr. Richard, lawyers have “quite a number of personality traits that distinguish them from the general public.” He found that lawyers are predominately autonomous introverts whose sociability scores are dramatically lower than the overall population, meaning they are less likely to possess “a desire to interact with people, especially a comfort level in initiating new, intimate connections with others.” Most would prefer to first work together with someone to build trust and then focus on creating genuine and more personal connections.

Given these personality traits, it is not surprising that lawyers do not want to think of themselves as “salespeople.” In today’s competitive legal market, however, lawyers need to accept and embrace the reality that whether they call

it business development, marketing, rainmaking, and yes, even “sales,” these pursuits will be a part of their professional life. To build a successful practice, they simply must get outside their comfort zone.

As a result, some law schools are implementing courses and workshops to prepare their students for business development in the legal world. Bloomberg Law recently highlighted, as part of its [Law School Innovation Program](#), the Top 10 skills lawyers wish they’d learned before practicing law. “Business development” was at the top of the list, followed by “client relationship management” and “networking skills.”

Building Your Coaching Curriculum

In the future, new associates may already be well-versed in these concepts by the time they join your firm. In the meantime, it is up to law firms to develop effective curriculums to bridge the gap. If specific business development and relationship-building activities are part of your firm’s core competencies and/or performance benchmarks, these can obviously provide a framework for both training and individual coaching. Beyond that, and with the

underlying causes of many lawyers' aversion to marketing in mind, business development coaching should emphasize seven, central principles which conveniently can be remembered with the acronym, **BARBARA**.

Basics

While lawyers at all levels within an organization will benefit from business development coaching, when working with the most junior lawyers, do not skip the basics. It is easy to forget that newer lawyers have many questions about how to handle themselves in daily networking and client service scenarios that many of us have come to take for granted. Often the most fundamental questions are top of mind for them, particularly since many of your newest lawyers began working during the pandemic and are just now starting to face a new world of interpersonal workplace encounters. Associates and younger lawyers want to know things like:

- How do I gracefully enter and exit one-on-one conversations?
- How can I approach a group and join the conversation at an in-person networking event?
- What are the pros and cons of “tag team” networking, i.e., is it better to attend networking

events alone or as part of a group of colleagues?

- How do I make a positive first impression and what are the key elements of a good quick pitch (previously referred to as the “elevator pitch”)?
- Are there tips for striking up a conversation and avoiding the awkward silence when I find myself as the first one from my team to join a remote call (or walk into a live meeting) with a client?

While these questions may seem rudimentary, it is important to remember that most of our newest lawyers come from a generation that is particularly fixated on the idea of understanding the “unwritten rules.” When provided with

a framework for navigating social/professional settings, developing lawyers will build the confidence to engage more fully in these types of activities, thus laying a solid groundwork for their future success.

Authentic

One of the reasons many lawyers — both junior and senior — hesitate to engage in business development is because they fear they will have to become someone they are not. While it is true that business development activities may cause them to stretch their competencies and exercise new skills, they should be guided to do so in ways that are true to their authentic selves. One size of business development does not fit all.

Most lawyers may be autonomous introverts, but as with any group, your lawyers still represent a spectrum of personalities and sociability levels. One-on-one coaching is the best way to get to know them as individuals and advise them on business development approaches that are both consistent with their personality and play to their strengths. For example, while walking up to a stranger at a reception and striking up a conversation may sound like one lawyer's nightmare, that same lawyer may be perfectly comfortable heading a bar committee.

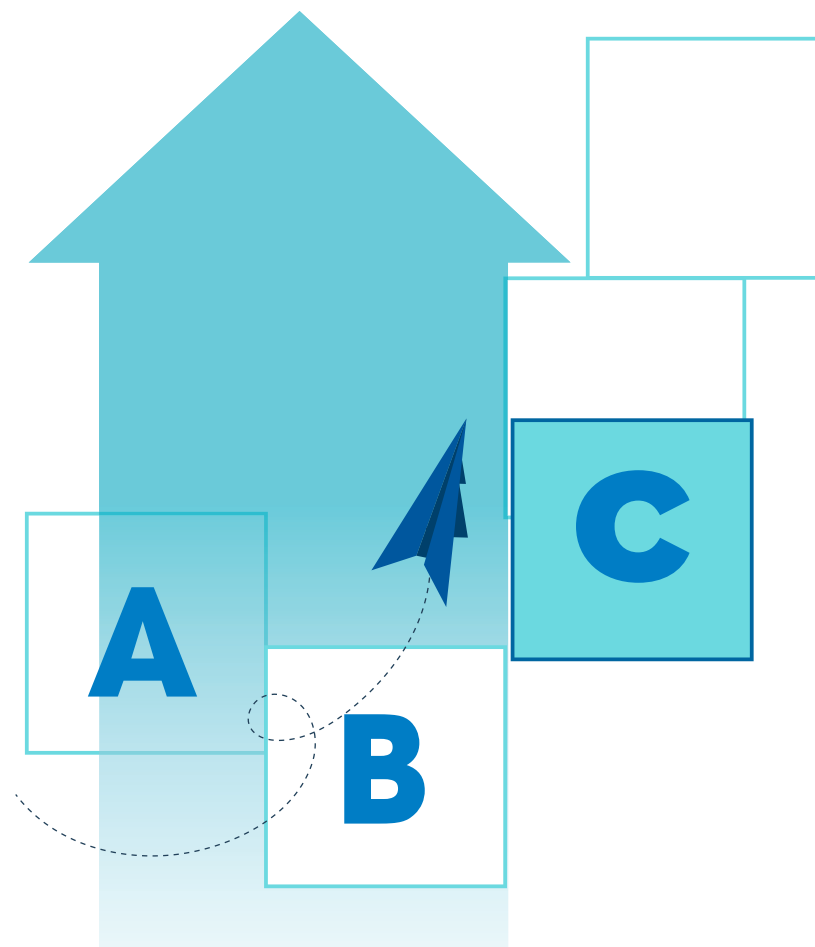
While on the face, both activities seem to involve interpersonal skills, the former will appeal more to classic Myers-Briggs®

“Extrovert” personality types who draw their energy from others, while the latter will appeal to “Judger” personality types who get fulfillment from making and sticking to plans. Personalized business development coaching that utilizes some form of personality assessment — or at least involves in depth discussions about what the lawyer excels at and enjoys most — can help lawyers think more broadly about the world of business development activities and identify those that resonate with them.

Relationships

In the end, business development boils down to genuine relationships — the ones we already have and want to nurture and grow, and the new ones we want to create. Coaching should help lawyers approach interactions inside and outside of their network in ways that are genuine rather than inauthentic, natural rather than forced. It can also help them recognize that the most effective relationship-building, even in a business development context, happens when relationships are perceived as a two-way street, rather than merely targeting those within their network as a potential source of business.

It is a matter of changing your lawyers' perceptions and turning around their thinking. For many, the image that comes to mind when they hear the words “sales” or “marketing” is of an aggressive individual who hounds others and employs hardcore tactics to persuade



them to purchase products or services. Lawyers need to be assured that selling legal services is different than selling cars, goods, or homes; overbearing sales tactics are not needed or desirable.

When lawyers can shift their mindset and approach business development with a focus on solving the problems of their contacts and potential clients, participating in sales and marketing becomes much easier to embrace. As Deb Knupp, Managing Director at GrowthPlay, points out, encouraging your lawyers to view sales as “an act of service” will make business development a more enjoyable activity. Moreover, spending time networking with individuals they feel a bond with and attending events and conferences in their area of expertise will make developing business more fun and rewarding.

With all of that in mind, it is essential for lawyers to take an inventory of their relationships as a starting point for business development. It is easy for lawyers to use excuses like, “I don’t know anyone who might give me business” or “I’m the first lawyer in my family so I don’t have any relevant contacts” as a way of bowing out of networking activities altogether. Most lawyers are surprised to learn, however, that their existing network is already much larger than they think. Coaching should walk lawyers through the process, at a granular level, of identifying who they already know, who they would like to know, and how the two groups may (sometimes unexpectedly) be connected.

Brand

Law firms should constantly reinforce the importance of building a positive and impressive personal brand. Lawyers begin developing their personal brands as law students and continue this process throughout their careers. Three of the most essential qualities of a strong personal brand are making positive first and continued impressions, doing excellent legal work, and communicating proactively.

When coaching lawyers on how to make positive first and lasting impressions, a key objective is to help them understand how they are perceived and remember that every action makes an impression. A good coach can provide an objective perspective to fine-tune the lawyer’s verbal, vocal, and visual cues. Word choice, tone, body language, posture, attire, actions, and reactions all play into personal brand.

Of course, mastering these traits alone is not enough to ensure a strong personal brand. Even the most polished presence will not make up for poor work quality. Lawyers must recognize that consistently delivering a high-quality work product is just as much a part of their branding. When a lawyer does not meet the client’s standards, it will be hard if not impossible to maintain a positive image.

Effective and timely communication is the third element necessary to develop a lawyer’s personal brand. Lawyers should understand and constantly be mindful of each client’s

unique expectations for communication in terms of frequency, level of detail, and timeliness, and meet or exceed those parameters.

Effective coaching should also remind lawyers that brand building is an important concept for internal networking too; in fact, the first networking on which new associates should focus their time and attention is internal. As they get to know their colleagues, and particularly more senior lawyers who will be a source of work, they are already “marketing” themselves and their skill set.

Lawyers can go above and beyond to develop their personal brand by identifying opportunities to speak, write, lead, and collaborate; utilizing social media to highlight and enhance their brand; and finding ways to share their own expertise and the capabilities of their colleagues and firm. Coaching should guide and support them through exploring all these brand-building options.

Apropos

In helping lawyers lay a foundation for business development, it is also vital to equip them with the skill sets that are most apropos now and into the future. Just like anything else in this world, different methods for connecting with and attracting potential clients become in vogue as a reflection of the times we live in and societal trends. For instance, while activities like golf outings or hosting a box at

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a professional sporting event will probably always be part of client development, the last three years have seen a marked rise in lawyers speaking at webinars and CLEs and providing in-house training for clients. Many law firms, in fact, report that this has become the predominant form of business development activity.

While, in keeping with the theme of authenticity and playing to one's strengths, public speaking may not be everyone's strong suit or preferred method of business development, all your lawyers should possess solid presentation skills for those times when speaking opportunities present themselves. Coaching on how to structure an effective presentation, vocal and physical techniques to enhance their presentation style, mastering PowerPoint and other technology, and in particular, best practices for remote and hybrid presentations should be part of your curriculum.

Likewise, coaching should respond to and anticipate other, future trends in business development activities and empower lawyers to adapt accordingly. Providing your lawyers with whatever skill-building is most essential and relevant to current social dynamics will give them a leg up.

Return on Investment

In finding creative ways to check the business development activities box, lawyers, especially the less experienced ones, can sometimes get starry-eyed and go off on a tangent. While coaching should not discourage their ingenuity or dampen their enthusiasm, it should help them focus their energy on those activities likely to have the best ROI. Rather than attending a cryptography law symposium halfway around the world, a lawyer's time might be better spent attending a local technology

industry group's conference. Likewise, instead of aiming to attract new clients by single-handedly building a brand-new practice group from scratch within your firm in a niche area of law, the lawyer might benefit more from getting to know a current client's recently on-boarded assistant general counsel and discovering what services and resources your firm can provide her as she gets up to speed in her new role.

We hear the “low hanging fruit” adage so often because it is true — the business development activities that are easiest and closest to us are often the best places to start. Coaching can provide an objective perspective that helps

lawyers prioritize their potential business development activities and rank them in terms of the amount of effort they will take compared to their likely effectiveness.

Achievable

Finally, a good coach will help lawyers create business development goals that challenge them without overwhelming them. A recent encounter with an associate, who was putting together an initial draft of her personal business development plan, offers an important lesson. Though she had dutifully filled out various sections of her firm's template, she had nothing listed under “Business Development Activities Within the Last 12 Months.” Upon further prompting, however, she revealed that she had in fact attended several local and national conferences, presented before several industry groups, accompanied partners on visits with prospective clients, had lunch with several law school classmates, was actively involved in volunteering with a charity she was passionate about, and was currently serving as co-chair of a local bar committee. When asked why on earth she had not listed any of these activities, she replied that she did not think any of them “counted” (in her words) because so far none of them had directly led to her bringing in a new client.

The moral of this story is that many associates have skewed perceptions about what is expected of them. Coaching can uncover such misconceptions and assure the young lawyer that

no one is demanding they land a multi-million-dollar client within their first six months on the job (or ever). Even for more seasoned lawyers, it is important that goals be realistic and achievable; when business development goals seem too daunting, lawyers may throw in the towel and give up before they even begin. They should be reminded that business development and marketing is a long game made up of many steps and that each of those steps “counts.” The key is to STAY ENGAGED. Even simple touchpoints like forwarding an article to a contact or “liking” a colleague's post on LinkedIn can keep the lawyer top of mind with their contacts and build relationships that may, eventually, lead to business.

Summary

Because they are predisposed to reject concepts like rainmaking and sales, many lawyers will engage in business development activities grudgingly...or not at all. Highly personalized coaching can help them uncover the roots of their hesitation, break down their objections, and assure them that they can find business development approaches and avenues that are not just doable but may even be enjoyable. A coaching framework focused on seven principles can provide the structure lawyers need, while being individualized enough to recognize each lawyer's unique strengths and circumstances: **Basics, Authentic, Relationships, Brand, Apropos, Return on Investment, and Achievable (BARBARA).**+



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