Ask the Coach

By Gary Mitchell; Managing Director, GEM Communications Inc. April 2009

Q. "I am a junior partner at fairly large and well respected regional firm. I have been engaged in marketing and client development efforts for some time but I am not getting the results I am after. I have even attended several workshops and intensive training sessions. What can I do to increase my ROI? What am I missing?"

A. I have worked with a lot of lawyers who fit this description, so understand you are not alone. First let me remind you of the four basic steps we teach our clients to follow in approaching client development. **Find** people who need your services, and make it easy for them to find you. **Build** relationships with them so that you can qualify them against your key client criteria. **Discover** specific needs so that you can **Offer** solutions (your services).

From our experience coaching lawyers at all years of call, what's usually missing falls under 'build' and 'discover'. Most lawyers want to jump from 1. Find right to 4. Offer, but you haven't built the relationship yet or gone far enough to find specific ways you can help them, so here's what you should do.

Start with the end in mind. Have a clear picture of the type of work you want to attract and from whom. You likely won't want to attract every type of file or transaction that can exist in your target market and you surely won't want to attract every potential client who has the work to give you. Then look at these four steps and review your contact list. Where are most of your contacts? Likely they will fall within the 'Build' and 'Discover' stages. So…

When you have lots of contacts, but little business to show for it, spend more time with your contacts getting to know them on a personal as well as business level. After you have met someone new, qualify them to ensure they meet your key client criteria. You can do this simply by asking them questions and getting a better understanding of their business and their needs. For all the people on your list you haven't done this with, now's the time to go back and take them out for coffee and begin to qualify them. Again, don't assume that because you have identified them to be a potential client that they are ready to become one. At this stage you have done well building a large list of contacts. Now it's time to mine that list. This is all about building relationships.

When you have great personal relationships, but can't seem to move them to a business context. When you have qualified them as a prospect that fits your client criteria, move it to the next level by asking for a more formal meeting (Discover) where you will learn about them, their challenges, goals, how their business really works, what is the most pressing need etc. You can't move to this step without building a rapport with them first. And, just because you have built that rapport doesn't mean it will turn into business— so go deeper. How will you know when you have gone deep enough? When you can answer just about anything about this person. If you still have questions, then you haven't gone deep enough.

Don't assume that because you've qualified someone to be a potential client that they are ready to become one.

Gary Mitchell
GEM Communications Inc.
Suite 675
142-757 West Hastings St.
Vancouver, BC
V6C 1A1
(604) 669-5235
www.gemcommunications.ca

When you don't get the results you'd like from delivering workshops, consider what follow up and follow through techniques you are using. Are you meeting people before and after your presentations? Are you asking them questions? Are you getting their business cards and agreeing on a follow up time? If not, begin with that. Watch your results improve.

Final thought: If you're frustrated with the training you've been provided in this area, if it's not working, if you need or want more, then speak up. This is a subject matter that often crosses the jurisdictions of both your firm's professional development and marketing initiatives. Both leaders have a vested interest in you getting what you need to be successful with these efforts. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

If your firm doesn't offer any formal training for client or business development skills, start with your needs and ask your leader responsible for professional development or marketing to help you find a learning opportunity best suited to your skill development needs and style of learning.

If your firm offers group or classroom training: Ask for some follow up support, either by the professional delivering the training, or by someone with the skills internally to help you. This can take the form of a formal coaching program, or simply be a series of strategically spaced touch-points to make sure you're on track. Make this about you and what you need.

If your firm already offers a formal coaching program: Get on the list to participate. Don't wait for others to prove it works first. And if you're matched with a coach that you just don't click with or who doesn't provide the kind of support you want, speak up. Ask to source out another one.

Good luck and let me know how these approaches affect your ROI.

This article first appeared in the April 2009 issue of The Canadian Bar Association's PracticeLink.

Gary Mitchell is the managing director of GEM Communications where he leads an international team of consultants and coaches who help lawyers and law firms prepare for and profit from transformation in the legal industry. GEM's services include strategic planning, marketing, media relations and a suite of coaching programs that address the talent development needs of law firms. Gary can be reached at gary@gemcommunications.ca or 604-669-5235 .