Business Partner Tips for Building Better Relationships

For a mutually beneficial and respectful relationship, share these tips with your business partners.

The Law Firm Atmosphere

The practice of law can be stressful! Generally, a law firm's clients do not plan for the exigencies of life and business that prompt legal intervention, but they expect immediate action when a situation does arise. For their part, attorneys seek to swiftly respond to the client's needs with timely, accurate and complete work. In short, both the client and the attorney want things done NOW. Frequently, legal administrators are managing heightened tensions and meeting tight deadlines as they work to meet the needs of both attorney and client.

The Decision-Making Process:

In most law offices purchasing decisions are made by a group or committee, not just one individual. Because of this, the decision-making process can be lengthy as the group comes to consensus. The responsibilities of administrators require acting as liaisons between firm management and the business partner. They are vested in expediting a well-considered decision to further the firm's goals. A word to business partners: *Be patient with this process*.

Administrators do rely on information from you. Whether a quick e-mail message or a full-blown presentation, the information is appreciated. You are best represented with complete and accurate information about your products or services. It is critical to be able to rely on the information that is received from you.

Sell not only your product, but your service. It is important to share the confidence that once the agreement is signed and the product delivered that there is adequate follow-through and support. This is true for equipment, supplies, software, etc.

Tips for Building Relationships:

The following suggestions are the top ways business partners should approach buyers in the legal industry:

- Learn all you can about the firm. Visit its Web site: Is it a large firm? Does it have multiple offices? Is it plaintiff work, general, corporate work, etc.? It is impressive when you already know a little about the firm and don't expect the administrator to spend time talking about the "general information." This information will allow you to use your valuable time to talk in detail about what you perceive the firm's needs to be and how your product or service can address those needs.

- Make an appointment. Do not drop by with the hope or expectation that the administrator is available. If you stop by without an appointment, it's best to drop off your business card and information for the receptionist to forward to the appropriate person.

- Rather than approach non-decision makers in a firm (staff and lawyers) about using your services and products, seek out the professional manager in the firm who is responsible for the decisions regarding your particular product or service. Decisions regarding the selection of a business partner are centralized in law firms for efficiency and cost effectiveness.

- Make a good first impression. For example, a "10-minute" meeting is set up for you to come in and introduce yourself and your company. You show up with three people and take the "tag team" approach. The administrator may now need to find a conference room and it could be awkward. It was unexpected. It is quite clearly going to be longer than a 10-minute meeting. If you feel it is important to have others with you, whether it is the initial meeting or subsequent meetings, make those needs known to the administrator prior to arrival.

- Approach each contact, each meeting, each phone call, each negotiation, and each proposal as a partnership. Strive to develop long-term relationships – don't look for the quick sale.

- Ask administrators what they would like your next step to be and respect those wishes. Maybe the product or service you have is really a "hot item" right now, or perhaps there are a couple other things more pressing for the next two to three months. Ask how often the administrator would like you to follow up with additional courtesy calls to check on the status of a proposal or see if the firm is now ready to look more seriously at your product/service. Confirm the preferred method of communication (phone, e-mail, mail). There are so many efficient ways to keep in touch – find out which works best.

- Continue communications with the administrator until you have been asked to contact someone else within the firm. In other words, don't go over the initial contact's head, including calling the managing partner to inquire on the status.

- Talk about the trends you are seeing in the legal industry. Administrators look to you to educate them about industry trends.

- Highlight service advantages and the accessibility to you or another person in your company who can resolve issues should they come up. Administrators like to know they will be taken care of once the deal is done and that they are not just left to a toll-free service number and the infamous voicemail nightmares.

- Concentrate on highlighting ***your*** company's virtues and strong points and offer examples of how other professional organizations have benefited from your product or service. Do not speak poorly of your competitors.

- Complete all items in the Request for Proposal (RFP). Incomplete responses create additional follow-up and waste time in the decision-making process. Instead, make sure you've addressed every question/item listed.

- Offer references from other law firms. The legal administrative community is large and vast, and yet it is very close and tight-knit. Administrators are your very best references. Be assured that when you provide top-quality products or services or go the extra mile, they will all know about it – everyone benefits!

- Maintaining a positive relationship after an unsuccessful negotiation is also vital to both parties' success. The administrator may change firms or may become disappointed with the original selection. If there was a positive post-negotiation relationship, the administrator could come to you in the future. And, if you maintain a positive relationship in spite of a lost bid, the administrator may still become a good referral for you when you call upon other administrators.

- Communicate, negotiate and build a long-lasting relationship!

Exhibitor Conference Tips

- Be visible and approachable during exhibit time. Don't sit. Smile and make eye contact. Wait until a break to check your email.

- Please don't try to monopolize an attendee for a long period of time. There is limited exhibition time, and attendees want to visit many exhibitors.

- Think in terms of providing information – not about making a sale. Start building the relationship.

- Let us know what's new in your industry.

- Ask the attendee if they would like your literature now or if they would prefer having it sent to them after the conference.

- Don't be hurt if an attendee does not stop at your table. Not all attendees will need your product/services.

- It's not just about **new** business - it's about maintaining relationships with your existing customers and clients. Spend time visiting with your current customers.

- Ask your current customers and clients to make introductions to other attendees.

- Participate in social functions with the attendees – it's a great way to build relationships.

- Please do not call us right away after the conference. We've been out of the office and need time to get caught up.

- **DO** follow-up on your leads, though. Take notes on business cards. If someone is interested in your product or service, contact them within two weeks.

- Most importantly, have fun!