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The Art of Communication

Developing Business In Tough Times

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In difficult economic times, two communication skills can help improve client relationships and generate more business. First, we can become our clients' trusted shoulder to lean on as they deal with their own difficulties. Second, we can help them understand the many ways in which we can help them as they deal with their difficulties.

Over the coming weeks and months, we will all be dealing with clients facing difficult decisions regarding their businesses. "How can I reorganize?" "What, if any, assets should I sell off?" "How do I deal with possible layoffs?" "How can I comply with whatever new rules come out of Congress?"

When we speak with clients, they often raise the same issues we may be thinking about in our own firms. Because we often have close relationships with clients, we sometimes allow the conversation to become a sharing of troubles. And it's important to let your clients know you can identify with them. However, in truly difficult times, your clients are more likely to need you to be their rock rather than their compatriot.

When a client is sharing his woes and you hear that little voice in your head say, "Me too," your best bet is to briefly identify with the client and then immediately turn the conversation back to how you might be able to help. It's important to let clients know that you hear their concerns—or outright fears—"I know what you mean. I hear the same concerns being raised by others." But don't let on that the "others" may be your own partners or spouse concerned about your business.

If your client asks how business is going, a vague, "We're hanging in there" is usually enough, particularly since your client will likely be too polite to pursue the issue. Then immediately ask the client a question to turn the focus back on him—"You mentioned concerns about layoffs. I know that's always difficult since you are so close to your employees. Where do you see the greatest difficulty in the process?"

Keep in mind that we are all basically self-focused. Once you turn the conversation back to the client and his needs, he is likely to forget about any issues you may be facing. Be sure to use other resources as your sounding board. Don't let your client, however close you may be, become the person with whom you commiserate.

Once your client is sharing his troubles, put all of your energy into listening so you can identify the areas where you might be helpful. Chances are you already do this with regard to your own practice area: It has made you successful and allowed you to garner your share of the pie. However, in difficult economic times, each "pie" is smaller, and your share may be harder to capture. Therefore, you need to be able to cross-sell the services of other members of your firm or organization.

Most law firms are not very successful at teaching lawyers how to cross-sell services. There are two steps a firm or an individual can take to increase results in this area. First, educate all lawyers in the firm about the strengths and successes of the other practice areas. Second, train all of the attorneys how to listen and respond to opportunities around those areas.

An attorney at a mid-size firm may have only a passing knowledge of what types of transactions lawyers in other departments work on, how they add value to their clients and how they have built their business. They are even less likely to know about recent successes their colleagues have experienced. If I practice intellectual property litigation, for example, I know how to listen for issues around that area. However, I might completely miss a comment by a client about a tax issue that could lead to business for one of my colleagues. As a result of our own limited knowledge base, our clients often see our firm in the limited capacity in which they interact with us, rather than in the context of the breadth of the entire firm's resources. To generate more business for the firm, you want to broaden your clients' understanding of your firm as a whole.

Many firms sponsor "Lunch & Learn" programs that bring attorneys together to share best practices and recent developments in the law. Encourage your firm to use the same forum to educate its lawyers on what the firm's other practice areas have done over the last year. This update should not be a litany of recent deals or cases, but should include how the practice

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area adds value to clients.

In those sessions, the presenting attorney should provide specific language—or buzz words—that colleagues should listen for when speaking with clients. Ideally, the attorney would share a particular war story or anecdote that encapsulates how she adds value to her clients. The story should be simple enough so that others will remember it when speaking to their clients.

Once you know what to share, the next step is understanding how to share it. Developing strong listening skills is essential for successful attorneys. Patience can be the hardest part of effective listening, particularly when we are scouting opportunities and want to jump at "Yes! We can help with that need!"

Once a client alludes to an issue that sounds like an opportunity, we are inclined to stop listening and start forming our answer. At this point, we are not listening; we are just waiting to talk. There's a big difference. If we continue to listen, we pick up on further cues from the client and are able to ask better questions and provide better quality answers. If we stop listening and just wait to talk, we miss opportunities.

When the client raises an issue that you believe provides an opportunity to help them solve a problem, stop before making any statement and instead think about what questions to ask. Stay away from immediate questions that suggest they hire you for the work. Focus instead on them and understanding their issue, not on your firm as a resource. Instead of asking, "Do you have any firm helping you with that issue?" say, "Help me understand the problem" or "how did that issue arise?" or "where do you see the issue heading?" Ask something that will both help you understand the issue better, and help the client feel you are genuinely interested in his concerns.

Once you have propelled the conversation far enough that you feel you understand the issue, rely on what you know about your firm's resources to offer a solution. Offer something easy for the person to say "yes" to. Don't say, "Why don't you hire us to work with you on that?" It's asking the client to take too much of a risk and is too pushy for a counselor relationship. Instead say, "One of my colleagues has done quite a bit of work in this area. In fact, just last month she helped a client resolve a similar issue. Would it be alright with you if I shared this information with her and sought her advice?"

Assuming the client says yes, don't whip out your phone and call your colleague—just make a note and tell the client, "Great, I'll get back to you later this week" and continue the conversation. After the meeting, call the client's assistant and schedule a phone meeting for you, the client and your colleague. Get comfortable taking it one step at a time.

If you want to broaden your opportunity to bring in business during difficult times, know more about what your firm has to offer, and learn to listen for the issues that your firm can help clients address.