

## Asking for Business From a Distance



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Wednesday, April 13, 2016

Legal services are increasingly provided to companies located across the country or even across the globe from the firms that serve them; and this creates a new level of complexity when it comes to business development. Maybe you and your team flew to Dallas or Tokyo to make pitch. You think it went well, but now you need to figure out how to follow up effectively long distance. Similarly, you may want to do additional work for an existing client located a thousand miles away. Should you fly out and see her, or is reaching out by phone sufficient? Such dilemmas are common in the modern world. Here are a few factors to consider when asking for business from a distance.

### **Asking for business feels a lot weightier for the attorney than for the client.**

An attorney may think that following up after a pitch or discussing the possibility of starting a new matter is a complex, delicate conversation and, therefore, it would be better to communicate in person. It is important to remember, however, that the conversation will probably feel very different to the attorney than to the client. A lawyer may find initiating such discussions to be stressful, like they are an evaluation of one's expertise, worthiness, or likability. Yet, if the lawyer is doing it well, such a conversation should not be dramatic or difficult from the client's perspective. If anything, it should be the opposite. The attorney is offering help, giving clients a chance to talk through the challenges they are facing, and hopefully bringing empathy, an outside perspective and relevant expertise, all of which is

appreciated. If there is a good fit between the client's needs and the legal services offered, the discussion naturally progresses towards a sale, regardless of whether one is on the phone or in person.

### **Words don't matter as much as tone of voice.**

Experience tells us that we can sense a great deal about another person's mood and attitude simply from hearing his or her voice telephonically. Think about the last few times you spoke to customer service representatives on the phone. They generally speak from call scripts. Did you notice that different people can communicate the same message, even use the same exact wording, but you as the customer can hear it very differently depending on who is speaking? One person may seem kind and approachable, another may seem "checked out" and uncaring, while a third may seem cold but capable. Our desire to do business with a company is heavily influenced by our sense of trust and connection to the customer service person—and that is largely a matter of tone, pace, intonation and other intangible factors that we pick up on almost instantaneously when interacting with others but which we are less attuned to in ourselves.

We have all heard that only 7% of your message comes through your words, 38% from voice and vocal cues and 55% from body language. This statistic, based on Dr. Albert Mehrabian's research, is frequently quoted out of context and applied to situations far outside the scope of the research, such as giving a speech or arguing a motion in front of a judge. Nevertheless, in situations such as business development where intent, credibility and character matter most, the tone of voice does make or break our effectiveness. The fact that we can't rely on visual input doesn't change this; it only makes the vocal segment of the non-verbal communication that much more important.

### **Your tone and other vocal cues are determined by your intention, attitude and approach.**

Even if you accept the premise that clients' impressions of, and desire to do business with, you will be heavily influenced by your voice, you still may be wondering what to do about it. Some people recommend speaking slowly, remembering to breathe, and varying pitch and pacing, all of which is good advice, as far as it goes. However, it is like a doctor addressing the symptoms rather than the underlying cause. When a lawyer speaks too fast or forgets to breathe, it is generally because he is thinking about himself, his own nervousness, or his desire to achieve a particular outcome, rather than about the client and her needs.

When a lawyer goes into a conversation genuinely focused on the client and seeking to understand her challenges, desires, and perspectives, he naturally communicates better. The intention to be helpful and collaborative generally pushes aside self-doubt and makes people more relaxed, flexible and responsive. Consequently, one of the most valuable things you can do before calling a client or potential client to ask for business is to make a deliberate choice about your intentions and how you want to approach the conversation. This creates a subtle but important shift in your demeanor and attitude, which automatically alters the tone, pitch and other vocal nonverbal signals and, in doing so, enables you to have more effective

conversations, even at a distance.

### **Individuals' affinity for phone conversations varies.**

While some people hate the telephone, many people are just as comfortable on the phone or teleconference as they are in person. Don't assume that your client or prospective client has the same attitude that you do. Look to the client's behavior as a guide. Does he prefer to wait for in-person meetings, or does he like to talk through things by phone? Also, if you have any doubt, you can always ask him directly. For example, you could say, "I have an idea for how my firm may be able to help you with \_\_\_\_\_. I'm planning to visit you in July. Would you prefer to wait until then to discuss this or would you rather talk sooner?" People like having a choice, and the most effective professionals of any kind are those who understand that people are different and adapt their approach accordingly.

### **Most of the time, any form of asking for business is preferable to none at all.**

A final factor to consider when asking for business from a distance is that while attorneys often worry about finding the right words or the right moment to follow up or initiate a conversation, this is one of the many situations where it is better to just do it. No matter how perfectly you conduct the conversation or how great your relationship, some companies will need your services and some will not. All you can do is ask. While this is no different than the situation when following up with clients at a closer proximity, I find that the distance becomes one more rationale for not having those uncomfortable conversations. Human beings tend to put off activities and discussions that feel awkward and our minds are excellent at finding excuses. Don't turn distance into an artificial obstacle.

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