LJN LAW JOURNAL NEWSLETTERS
Marketing The Law Firm®
An ALM Publication
Volume 30, Number 12 • April 2015

'Speed-Reading' Your Clients

By Victoria Arnold

One characteristic that successful rainmakers share is their ability to quickly establish relationships and close the sale. How do they do it? Many are keen observers, good listeners and have honed their abilities to match their own interpersonal/ communication style with that of their prospective clients. They have naturally learned how to "speed-read" people. This helps them increase the probability of smoother sailing through every step of the business development cycle. But one need not be a "natural" to be effective in this arena.

Anyone can learn how to improve his or her abilities to speed-read people, thanks to an ever-growing body of research and assessment tools (Myers Briggs Type Indicator, DiSC, HBDI to name a few) that are designed to identify personal preferences and communication styles. Many books, seminars and certification programs are devoted to this topic. One could spend a lifetime delving ever deeper into the nuances of communication. Fortunately, it is possible to focus on several key concepts that can enhance business development efforts. This article highlights a few of these and draws heavily on the concepts outlined in the Myers Briggs. (Disclosure: the author is certified in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator,® the oldest and most widely used assessment instrument.)

Be Clear About the Stages of the Business Development Cycle

To quote my colleague, Peter Johnson, "Developing business is all about relationships. People tend to hire those they like and trust." (Unless they are buying a commodity service.) The process starts with establishing rapport and building trust; then moves on to uncovering client needs and finally offering solutions. The goal, of course, is to get to the "ask" and the "close."

The speed with which the business developer moves through this process with the client depends on the urgency of the client's need. As we know, however, when selling legal services, the process generally takes considerable time. (Rushing to a close before working through the other steps will surely derail the process.) Each step of the way, we engage certain behaviors and exhibit preferences for:

- How we deal with the outside world—do we focus our attention and get our energy externally (extravert) or internally (introvert)?
- The way we take in and process information—do we want to know about the specifics or are we more interested in the big picture?
- What is important to us when considering possible solutions—are we interested in the logical, fact-based implications or the impact on relationships?
- How quickly we make decisions – do we move quickly to closure, or take our time?

Know Thyself

Everyone runs into difficult business development situations. Those uncomfortable moments are usually the result of misreading the client's style or not understanding how to deal with a style that is different from one's own. When you meet someone with whom you feel instant rapport, it is usually a pretty good indication that your communication styles (and how you process information) are similar. Most of us are also acutely aware when we're engaged in conversations that feel slightly off balance. Often, this is a sign that the opposite is true – we've met someone whose preferences do not match our own.

Good business developers are clear about their own communication styles. They understand what works for them and what kinds of style differences tend to trigger their hot buttons. They educate themselves about what to observe and listen for in their clients' communication and in each of the various business development stages. They also act on their observations by adjusting their communication to fit the client's preferences.

EXTRAVERT OR INTROVERT?

Much has been studied and written about the importance of nonverbal communication, especially in the meet and greet stage of any relationship. (One oft-cited statistic: It takes the average person about 7 seconds to form an impression about someone he/she is meeting for the first time.) Nonverbal communication is a vast field of study and includes aspects of the visual, auditory, and tactile. We are not going to cover this aspect of communication here, but instead focus on the clues clients give us about whether he/she is an extravert or introvert. These include: How quickly and loudly does the individual talk? Does he/she speak briefly and to the point, or run on? As the conversation progresses, do you notice that the client tends to "think aloud," or pauses before answering questions or sharing information?

A gregarious, fast-talking rainmaker can make a rather quiet, slower talking client feel more at ease by slowing down and giving the client more time to reflect and respond. On the other hand, the rainmaker with a quieter way of communicating can benefit from picking up his/her energy level and the speed of speech. This doesn't mean that the extravert must act like an introvert or vice versa. It means that each adjusts the range of behavior a bit closer to the client. Most introverts would say that it's much harder for them to develop business than for an extravert. True, but to allow that to stand in the way of developing business is a career-limiting move. There are ways to introverts can learn to adapt.

A recent example of this situation: I was working with a partner, who describes himself as an "introvert's introvert." His idea of a nightmare: having to attend any kind of meeting or event that involves more than one person. He recently finished helping a (much younger) client buy a bar and restaurant. The client invited him attend the opening. The partner did not want to go, but also did not want to disappoint his client.

We worked together to identify where he was moderately comfortable adjusting his behavior and developed the strategies he would use to "make it through." What that meant was that he arrived at the beginning of the party, so he wouldn't have to deal with a large crowd and would have time to talk with his client. He would make a point to have a conversation with 2 or 3 other guests and came up with a series of questions he might ask to get the conversation going. In addition, he agreed to an amount of time he thought he could tolerate. Because he had a plan, he found that he was more comfortable than he anticipated he would be.

UNCOVER NEEDS AND OFFER SOLUTIONS

We know that a key component to uncovering needs is referred to as active listening—rephrasing what you think you heard the prospect say and confirming with her/him before moving on to offer possible solutions. This is also the time to identify what kind of information is important to the client; what kind of information he/she likes and trusts. Also during this phase of business development the client will provide insights about what is important to him/her when considering possible solutions.

Taking in and processing what the business developer has to offer: specifics or big picture? Some clues: Does the client ask for specific information – focus on the present? Describes things or seeks to understand things step by step and wants precise descriptions?

Factors important to the client in making a decision: tasks or relationships? What hints is the prospect giving you about which factors are important in making a decision? Does he/she ask questions that are logical and task focused? If so, chances are he/she will be making decisions based on more impersonal, objective logic. Or is the client demonstrating more concern about how the decision will affect personal priorities and relationships? In this case, the client will demonstrate concern for the people impacted by the buying decision.

FOUR MAJOR TYPE PREFERENCES

Susan Brock in her publication, Introduction to Type and Selling, applied the Myers Briggs to the sales process. She defines the following four major styles and provides some concise prescriptions for what business developers can do, once they have figured out type, to match the client's preference:

1. ***Details and logical.*** Sales approach: Be straightforward, lay out the facts, and demonstrate how responsible you are. (The client values acting responsibly.)

2. ***Details and impact on people.*** Layout the facts, articulate how this will affect the people involved, personalize the relationship and service you are providing. (These clients value personal loyalty.)

3. ***Big picture and impact on people.*** Sales approach: address the big picture, how it impacts the people involved or supports their values, and support the vision. (These clients value making a difference.)

4. ***Big picture and logical.*** Sale approach: focus on the big picture possibilities (not specifics) and how these possibilities create logical options. (These clients value options that fit needs now and in the future).

Closing the Sale: Fast or Slow?

Throughout the business development cycle the client will drop hints as to how quickly (or not) a decision will be made, but it will become even more obvious when the close is in sight. Typically clients fall into two categories (also courtesy of Susan Brock):

1. ***Clients who like getting to closure.*** These individuals will display signs of impatience with an overly long description or procedure. They may move to decision quickly (sometimes prematurely). They often use "…ed words: looked, compared, evaluated. So, whatever you do with this client, don't drag out the process.

2. ***Clients who enjoy the process.*** These clients like to explore options. They will resist cutting off options and making decisions too soon. They use "...ing "words: looking, comparing, exploring. With these clients it is important to allow time and space for decision-making.

Take the First Step

Any lawyer can, if willing, learn to apply what they know about themselves and what they observe in others to enhance their development successes. Having a framework, be it Myers Briggs or any of the others tools, is helpful to understanding ourselves and our clients. After that it's practice, practice, practice.

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