

Rainmaking

The Art of Selling: Converting Contacts into Clients

SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN | Don't assume prospects need your services or expertise before they indicate a genuine interest—or before you know what their true needs are. Otherwise, you end up making a self-promotional pitch, which, at best, leads to wasteful, premature selling and, at worst, kills the opportunity.

You can only sell effectively when someone (1) wants and needs what you have to offer and (2) has decided that you are the person from whom to purchase it.

Selling occurs when you match your services to a specific person's articulated needs. It is the process of getting that person to *commit* to hire you. Yes, effective networking and relationship building facilitate the process, but selling only succeeds through a series of interactions, after you have worked an individual contact through the sales pipeline.

The Basics of the Pipeline

What's important about the sales process is that people are buying a solution, something that adds value

or helps achieve an objective. It requires a series of interactions and is rarely a one-or-two discussion transaction. It may take anywhere from three months to ten years to develop a contact into a client. And it may also take as many as 10 or 15 contacts to land just one client. This means you must focus on who is in your sales pipeline, carefully distinguishing between those contacts that are "suspects," "prospects" and "active leads."

A contact becomes a suspect when you identify the person as someone you think may or should need your services.

A suspect becomes a prospect when you have had an initial series of discussions to establish that this individual or entity actually uses or needs lawyers—with your expertise, billing rate and the like—to help in the identified area.

A prospect becomes an active lead once the two of you actually engage in discussions about how you might help resolve a problem or pursue a specific strategy—and how much the approach might cost.

It is only at this point that you are actually engaged in closing the sale. How do you get there? Here are tips on to proceed through the various stages.

Start with Your Existing Clients

Selling is not just about getting new clients. Your most valuable clients that you currently serve should be "sold" every day. You must continue to exceed these clients' satisfaction with your service, work product and value and continue to nurture their loyalty and trust.

These highly satisfied clients will engender long-term relationships that provide solid, repeat business, good references and enthusiastic referrals. From the time you land a new client, the real selling begins.

Defining Ideal Targets and Your Value Proposition

Instead of trying to turn every contact into a client, devise a profile of your ideal client. Consider the type of person, business or organization you like to represent, and think about the location, type of legal matter and financial parameters involved—meaning who can afford your full rate or fee. Determine how and where you have attracted these types of clients before.

With these targets now on your screen, be very clear on what you can provide that is of value and how it is distinct from other lawyers' services. Be sure you can articulate



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to referral sources and targeted prospects how your services can help them meet their goals, improve their bottom line, get them out of trouble or pursue an opportunity.

Taking Steps to Convert Suspects into Prospects

Once you have built a profile of your ideal client and can articulate what you offer, review your contact list. Which of these “suspects” are individuals with whom you could initiate a luncheon meeting or conversation?

They might be people with whom you share an existing interest. They might already have knowledge about what you do or know of your role in a recent case. Perhaps the two of you have had a preliminary discussion about your firm, your expertise or a mutual referral source. Consider what interest or knowledge you have in common with each suspect. Then contact that individual about talking further in person.

Qualifying Your Prospects as Active Leads

If, following your meeting, you understand there is a mutual interest in further discussion, you should now begin a process of collecting information. But do not fall into the trap of thinking you have a *real* prospect just because your contact said, “Thank you for lunch. I enjoyed our discussion. Why don’t you send me a letter or brochure?” Many people do this to be polite, but they cannot be considered genuine leads.

Until you are truly ready to sell to an individual with whom you have discussed real needs, including potential strategies and fees, resist propos-

ing anything specific. Converting people into *active* prospects or leads usually requires several meetings or interactions to discern issues and needs *and* to explore whether and how you might be the best person to help with those.

Selling to Active Leads

When you know you have an active lead, then you are ready to begin the process of selling. This does not mean “pitching” your services or expertise at this person. It means engaging in a formal process of getting and giving information—focused on building your understanding of genuine needs, priorities, personal agenda, past experiences, current lawyers, buying triggers and purchasing decisions. By asking the right questions over and over, you’ll be able to better connect your solution and approach with the person’s expressed goals and desired outcomes.

Both during your discussions and at the end of each interaction, be sure to secure a commitment to a next step. Make sure the prospect agrees to your proposal for a follow-up action *and* a date for accomplishing each action. You are engaged in a successful sales process only when your prospect actively returns interest and commitment.

Converting Active Leads to Clients: Closing the Sale

Remember that sales is a series of conversations and commitments, not a one-shot deal. You only close a deal when an active prospect has decided that you’d be the best person to satisfy a specific, articulated need. So keep asking questions that get to the root of the problem and respond

with strategies or additional questions that reflect your experience, expertise and approach. Don’t miss a commitment signal that your prospect is ready to buy. Listen for clues like, “How long might it take you to do this? How much would you charge? Who else in your firm would help with this?”

Also, remember to indicate your interest in working with this person and *be genuine* about it. If you have developed a relationship with someone and have a genuine interest in their needs, let them know that you’d sincerely like to work with or represent them.

Becoming Expert in a Very Fine Art

In the end, the key to effective selling is in the art of asking questions and listening closely. Good questions help you accomplish several critical things:

- Identify a prospect’s true needs early
- Establish rapport
- Identify who and how decisions will be made to hire a lawyer
- Reinforce your credibility
- Generate mutual interest in following up

Unfortunately, research shows that professionals usually spend 80 percent of the time talking when meeting with a prospect. However, reversing this and talking only 20 percent of the time actually enables you to better control the conversation and provide the perfect solution for the prospect. Perfecting this art will help you convert many of your current contacts into new clients and your current clients into bigger clients and more active referral sources. ^{1P}