

# Hiring Sales Professionals at Law Firms: An Inside Account of the First & Most Successful Implementation

By [Steven M. Bell](#) on September 17, 2024

In recent blog posts, we mentioned many law firms are once again considering forming [sales forces](#). And we also opined that [sales professionals at a law firm](#) is a concept that can work.

That's why we were so honored by the guest appearance of Womble Bond Dickinson partner Press Millen at our recent [Chief Sales Officer/Chief Marketing Officer Boardroom](#).

Press is widely considered to be the godfather of sales at law firms, and he is credited with being the architect of the profession's first sales force.

At the Boardroom meeting, Press recounted that the idea of a sales force at a law firm sprang from his experience working with a Top 10 accounting firm. That firm approached Press about a tax case he successfully litigated. The accounting firm wanted to transform the court's finding into a "sales-tax-reduction product" to be sold to large companies in North Carolina, the state where the case was tried. Reflecting on the accounting firm's success in promoting the product, Press wondered how the law firm itself could use its own intellectual property from that tax case (and others) to grow firm revenue. "We needed our own sales professional to help us get our salable products to market," Press said.

Conceiving of sales professionals at a law firm was one thing. Making it happen was another. Press first presented the idea to the firm's Managing Partner and Management Committee, who agreed Press should pursue the idea. Working with the Client Development Committee he chaired, Press conducted informational interviews with the Chief Sales Officers from Arthur Andersen and other professional services firms. He authored white papers, exploring how the concept of law firm sales would work—ethically, financially, and practically. Eventually, after much deliberation, a search firm was engaged, a nationwide search ensued, and the (or at least one of the) industry's first sales professional was hired. This initial hire was soon followed by others, leading to a non-lawyer sales force of seven professionals at its peak.

Since then, other firms have created sales teams, though not nearly as fast or as thoroughly as other professional services verticals have done. The legal industry is still in its early stages of adopting – and adapting to – the idea of sales professionals, so Press's observations about the unfolding of law firm sales several years ago still are topical.

In his presentation to our Boardroom, Press summarized some of the questions and issues on which he and Womble deliberated en route to the creation of the Sales Director role. As he listed these considerations, he provided color commentary, some of which is offered (in *italics*) below.

## The 4 Big Questions

1. Does the law firm have the right platform for a sales function to succeed?
2. What are the impediments to launching a sales function?
3. What are the attributes of a successful law firm sales professional?
4. How do sales professionals improve the firm and its culture?

## The Right Platform

1. Does the firm have a broad practice with name recognition?
2. Does the firm have a reasonably positive image?  
*"I don't think even the world's greatest sales professional could save a disreputable law firm."*
3. Will firm management provide sufficient investment for it to succeed?  
*"Successful salespeople rightfully expect to be paid well. Firms need to recognize this reality and be prepared to offer market compensations."*
4. Are the lawyers willing to work collaboratively and team with salespeople?
5. Does the firm have a compensation system that accommodates the needs of both salespeople and equity owners?
6. Does the firm have something to sell?
7. Does the firm have a clearly defined list of targets, whether defined by geography, practice, industry, or some other criteria?

## Impediments to the Success of a Sales Function

1. Lawyer propensity to chase the "nth billable hour" instead of investing time in new clients or expanding work at existing clients.  
*"The financial reward of billing another hour is clear. The investment of an hour into business development is speculative."*
2. Lawyers' lack of sales acumen.  
*"No lawyer that I know became a lawyer because they wanted to do sales."*
3. Lawyers are not trained well enough (or at all) in sales.  
*"They just don't learn to listen more than they speak. Sometimes they just show up and throw up."*
4. Fear on the part of lawyers that salespeople lack professionalism (and will come off as stereotypical 'smooth talkers').  
*"Lawyers fear that a salesperson is going to show up in a multicolored plaid suit, looking like a used-car huckster."*
5. Imagined ethical concerns.  
*"Sales professionals work under the auspices of partners, and they are required to follow the same rules as the lawyers. Lawyers need to understand how the rules can work, not how they can be used to block progress."*
6. Lack of information (about clients and prospective clients and their needs).
7. Lack of something to sell.
8. Fear of failure.  
*"Unfortunately, this is a chronic attribute of many lawyers."*

## Attributes of a Successful Law Firm Sales Professional

1. Not a lawyer.  
*"I think that sometimes lawyer training impedes the ability of lawyers to be great at sales. That's why we did not hire lawyers in the Womble sales force during the time I led Client Development."*
2. Previous experience as part of a professional sales force and fluent in sales process
3. Knowledge of sales process
4. Motivated
5. Intelligent (on a par with attorneys)
6. Friendly and personable
7. Diplomatic (able to navigate the internal firm issues)

## How Salespeople Can Improve a Law Firm

1. Sales preparation
2. Targeting
3. Technique
4. Discipline
5. Follow-up
6. Filing the pipeline
7. Pushing lawyers out of their comfort zone.

*"I think that some lawyers were afraid that if a partner showed up at a client's office accompanied by a sales professional and said, 'Meet my salesperson!' a trap door would open and dispatch the lawyer and the salesperson to a fiery demise. Guess what? It never happened."*

LawVision strives to feature exciting and knowledgeable guest presenters – like Press – at each of our Boardrooms, which – in addition to the [CSO/CMO Boardroom](#) – includes the [Business Development Director Boardroom](#) and the [Marketing & Business Development Boardroom](#) exclusively for Canadian law firm executives. If you are interested in the 2025 cohorts, please let me know.

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