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How to Ask for Work

By LawVision on April 6, 2016

"Teach me how to close…I need help with 'the ask'."

This a common request from many of my new coaching clients. Many come to me with reasonably healthy lists of good quality contacts. They seem very well connected, go to all the right events, and belong to all the right organizations. They enjoy good credibility amongst their peers and colleagues, yet they still have very small books of business. Like patients coming to the doctor with the diagnosis already in hand, they lay the solution to their problem at my feet: "Teach me how to ask for business," they say.

However, after a few foundational questions, we typically discover that "closing" is not necessarily the issue (although there is always room for improvement there). We usually discover that there are a few steps in the process that they are missing, and if they learn to master these interim steps, the "close" or the "ask" becomes much easier. After all, closing is not some magical dark art only practiced by a select skilled few. When done right, it is simply the logical next step in a consultative conversation.

That middle point between initial contact and new client is all about understanding needs and building trust, and moving that contact to new client is accomplished by the simple art of asking good questions. If you fall in this category—you have good relationships but aren't sure how to convert them into good clients—start with a list of good, open-ended, probing questions. And here, please note that I am talking about the kind of questions that come from an honest, authentic need to understand your contact's business and business life, not an interrogation about whether your contact has any work available in your particular practice area.

Here are some categories of questions to get you started in building a good foundation for understanding the needs of your current relationships:

How does it work?

> Get curious about your contact's business. Assume you might have to run the business yourself one day and start asking everything you would need to know to be in charge. How does the company get goods to market? What are production costs? How does it keep good people? How do market fluctuations affect its bottom line? Are there import/export issues? Where is it exposed to risk? How does it compete with other providers? Understanding your contact's business helps build a relationship that transcends the mere social and moves your conversations to discussions that may uncover critical needs you may be able to address.

Why this?

> Finding common ground is important. One way to do this is to back up and find out how your contact found his or her path. Why did this contact choose to get into this business? What set of decisions led to the position he or she now holds? What is the back story? Asking questions along this line will teach you something personal about your prospect and will allow him or her to open up and share something that may help you connect.

How does it not work?

Ask questions that uncover problems. Uncover issues that are consistent problems for your contact. What causes him or her to worry? What problems need to be resolved to move the business forward? What problems does he or she think about repeatedly? Be careful to not ask questions that only elicit legal solutions or worse, only seek solutions in your specific practice area. The idea here is to assess needs, not find work. If you switch into this mode, your contact will sniff it out immediately, and the meeting will shift from trust-building to trust-crushing in a nanosecond.

How does it really not work?

Huthwaite, in the famous book *SPIN Selling*, calls this the implication question. What are the implications of not solving some of these problems? By asking this question, you find out what is really significant to the prospect and where the real emphasis for solutions should lie. This could be the most important question you ask. Find out what is most important to the client and zero in on that problem, even if doing so means no immediate work for you or your firm. Focusing on the client's agenda first builds trust and a foundation as later needs are uncovered that may require your expertise.

Who makes it work?

As you get to know your contacts, find out where they sit in their organizations and use them to help you determine who in their organizations will ultimately decide whether to hire you. Eventually, this is information you are going to need. Nobody closes business unless they are talking to the people who make the decisions. Get this information early on—it affects your strategy.

Why would you change something?

Is the pain significant enough to make a change? Sometimes prospects experience pain in their work lives and need to get it off their chests, but it's not significant enough to do anything about. If you find out that's the case, it's ok: you've built some trust, formed a relationship, and had the chance to get to know someone better. However, the issue may be painful enough that change is necessary. That change may even involve hiring you. Find out the level of pain and whether it rises to the level of necessitating a change.

When would you change something?

If change is on the horizon, get a feel for the sense of urgency. Is this something that needs to happen right away? If this problem is not fixed in the next few months, will the company be in grave danger? Get a timeline for resolution. Timelines and levels of urgency are a window into the significance of the pain.

If you find yourself wondering how the experts became great "closers," remember that a big part of the process involves that fuzzy place between knowing someone and asking them for their business. Don't forget those middle steps that require you to build trust, understand needs, and build relationships. Do that, and the close will become a natural conclusion to an authentic friendship.