

Is My Partner Stupid? Is My Partner a Thief? Cross-Selling Fears as Obstacles

By [LawVision](#) on August 9, 2016

This is it, folks, this is what it's all about.... This is for the whole megillah, for the whole ball of wax, for the whole kit and caboodle, for the whole enchilada, for the whole shootin' match. This is for all the marbles.

John Candy's famous line from the classic movie "[Rookie of the Year](#)" couldn't be a better way to characterize cross-selling in law firms. For years, cross-selling has been seen as the almost unreachable holy grail of law firm business development. Firms know if they can figure out how to cross-sell their services they can increase revenue substantially and cement relationships with clients exponentially. Yet it's a program that often falters; we keep at it because we know intuitively our firm is leaving money on the table, but for some reason cross-selling initiatives often die.

It's really a pretty simple concept. We do a certain type of work for a client, and we have the capability to do work for them in additional areas. They are currently giving that work to another firm. We want the client to give us that work. So simple, so much potential revenue—the "whole shootin' match," as Candy would say, and yet so many cross-selling initiatives fail. What is the reason?

There are many answers and many partial solutions but when you distill it down to its core elements, the answer lies in trust. More specifically, it lies in two specific questions lawyers must answer before cross-selling will work at any firm. Here are those questions:

1. Is my partner stupid?
2. Is my partner a thief?

A classic approach to cross-selling is to make a list of all firm clients who are also giving work to other firms and then create teams to go after them. Or, as an alternative, connect the partner who "owns" each client to firm lawyers with expertise in the areas the client is having other firms cover.

The assumption is that everyone will want to participate. After all, it brings more revenue into the firm, and under most law firm compensation structures, both partners involved will get some financial reward for participating.

This approach neglects two things: the key elements of trust and assigning the duty to build that trust. The puzzle of cross-selling in a law firm is complex, and no one piece is a silver bullet. But firms would do well to focus on the relationship partner's fears and the duty to alleviate those fears on the part of the partner seeking to do the new work.

Cross-selling, at its core, is a sale. And, just like in any other sale, someone needs to be convinced. In this case, the sale comes in two parts. The first sale is convincing the relationship partner that cross-selling is a good idea. The second sale is convincing the client to hire the firm in a new area.

Firms too often skip the first sale, assuming it is already accomplished, and move forward to attack the second sale. What

they miss is that one of their “salespeople” (the relationship partner) is often secretly, and sometimes not so secretly, not on board.

Making that first sale requires more than just a financial incentive; it requires addressing what veteran salespeople call “FUDs” (fears, uncertainties, and doubts). Relationship partners may have a whole host of FUDs in that first sale, and those FUDs must be addressed just like in any other sale. Let’s dive a little deeper into the most common FUDs: “Is my partner stupid?” and “Is my partner a thief?”

Is my partner stupid?

As a relationship partner, I’ve spent years cultivating a relationship with my client. There is a bond of trust between us. I take care of my client, and in return my client takes care of me. The relationship is one in a series of personal relationships at the client organization that I have cultivated over the years, as key players have come and gone. The client trusts me with important decisions, and I deliver. Yes, we have an opportunity to do some employment work for them, but I don’t really know our employment team too well. What if they don’t do a good job, or miss a deadline, or don’t meet the same level of client service my client has come to expect from me? That will reflect poorly on me and may threaten the relationship I have taken so much time to cultivate—a relationship that is central to how I make my living.

Is my partner a thief?

What if the new area of work becomes a larger area of concern for the client? Soon they will be calling the subject matter expert directly rather than going through me. Will the partner with whom I shared my valuable client continue to honor the original relationship, or will the new bond forged with the new partner undermine me and cause my relationship or my compensation to diminish? In essence, will my partner, over time, steal my client?

The duty

The duty to alleviate these fears lies with the lawyer seeking that new work. Attempts to initiate cross-selling by relying solely on the generosity of relationship partners is laudable but ineffective. The duty of that first sale, alleviating relationship partners’ fears, falls naturally and squarely on the new lawyer. In pursuit of that work, the new lawyer should not take the relationship partner’s cooperation for granted. Those FUDs are real, even if they are not verbalized, and the approach should be to pursue an internal sale just like any other sale, with all the key elements of a sale: finding common ground, understanding needs, building trust, addressing objections and fears, matching capabilities to needs, proposing solutions, closing, follow-up, and cementing the sale.

When you approach cross-selling, remember to focus on partner trust. Someone, somewhere may be asking, “Is my partner stupid?” and “Is my partner a thief?” Make sure the right person is answering those questions and alleviating those fears to the relationship partner’s satisfaction. Done right, your cross-selling cooperation and subsequent firm revenue will soon swell.