

Law Firm Business Development: Building a Sales Team

By [Silvia L. Coulter](#) on December 16, 2020

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A question for firm leaders: If there were a way to quickly establish relationships with buyers at companies desired as clients, expand work at existing clients, collapse the sales cycle, increase top-line revenue, take some of the pressure off of talented rainmaking lawyers, and add business professionalism at the firm, would you consider making an investment?

Over the last 20 years, several firms have answered this question, "Of course!" as they initiated professional sales functions led and expanded by experienced sales professionals. Curiously, though, despite the measurable benefits and the precedent that already exists, many firms have not. They remain woefully behind professional services firms such as public accounting, consulting, and even architecture. Because law firms are using the current pandemic-induced business disruption to evaluate all their businesses' components, perhaps it is time to also revisit the concept of professional sales as a part of today's law firm.

With some exceptions, lawyers dislike and deprioritize selling. Most did not anticipate it as part of their careers and have received no training, so they are generally not as good at it as a trained sales professional who has experience selling intangible offerings. To address these realities, some firms realize the enormous benefits of hiring sales managers and building teams of sales professionals. Naturally, there may be some initial backlash against management for heading in this direction, but the right sales professionals can quickly change partner perceptions. Yes, we're talking about hiring externally focused, client-facing sales professionals. The benefits are significant, and partners who work with seasoned sales pros realize quickly that these business professionals bring to the pursuit team the enhanced ability to open doors, advance relationships, identify opportunities, prepare for sales meetings, participate materially (if not outright lead) sales conversations, identify and address sales obstacles, and advance discussions to the point where clients and potential clients can make a yes or no decision to the offering – in other words, to close.

Recently the head of litigation of a global giant said, "Why would we hire someone like that who could turn around and walk out the door with our firm's client contacts and go across the street and do the same thing?" We ask, how is this different from the hiring of lateral lawyers and other business professionals who serve the client? It is an acceptable risk. And, in any event, when it comes to sales professionals, it is important to realize that though they may be an essential part of the firm's relationship with a client, the client is served by a lawyer or team of lawyers whose role is to provide outstanding service and value while addressing legal issues. A sales professional's relationship skills are important, no doubt, but it is the service team and its professionalism that cements a client to the firm.

A department chair of a different 700-lawyer firm stated, "When we first hired Tricia, most of our partners were aghast that we had hired a sales professional. Then, suddenly, everyone wanted her time and help, and one person was not enough. It is amazing how such a professional works with our partners and how we have increased our odds of winning business by combining her business skills with our lawyers' legal ones. Now, we cannot imagine not having salespeople at the firm."

And what about the all-important client perceptions of a firm adding sales professionals? "When we first launched sales at our firm," says Press Millen, who was instrumental in engineering the profession's first sales function at Womble Bond Dickinson, "our partners envisioned that when a salesperson showed up at a client, a trap door would open, sending the

entire team to a fiery hell. Needless to say, that did not happen.” In fact, most general counsel deal with the sales professionals within their businesses, and they understand the role and importance of sales. To them, although it is a bit novel, having a sales professional on the law firm’s team seems natural and helpful in moving forward with business opportunities.

Beyond doing traditional sales tasks such as targeting, opening doors, advancing relationships, and identifying new opportunities, professional salespeople enhance existing firm business development. For instance, want to transform key client teams to true strategic account teams? Get the help of a salesperson who is responsible for client growth. Want to win more opportunities when competing against other firms? Hire a sales professional. Want to up your odds of winning proposals? Hire a sales professional who can identify and address the make-or-break sales issues resident in RFPs. Excellent sales pros, like great litigators, are trained to win. For each opportunity, they create a sales strategy and pursue it with a singular focus.

Where does a firm start? Who does the salesperson report to? Start by looking at the firm’s most important clients – the ones that represent 80% of the firm’s revenue. Most firms find that these clients comprise one or two or at most a handful of industries. Identify and hire a professional from that industry who has strong and proven sales experience and extensive contacts with decision-makers in that sector. This could be someone from an accounting or consulting firm or directly from the industry itself.

The reporting structure can be tricky. Many good and strong salespeople would never dream of reporting to a marketing person; however, that does not have to be the case. Sales and marketing are both symbiotic components of the business development continuum, and a strong marketing leader who has excellent management/leadership skills and an appreciation of the unique skills that salespeople bring and excellent management/leadership skills can be an effective administrator of the sales function. If not to a marketing leader, sales professionals should report directly to department chairs or managing partners.

The reporting relationship is just one aspect of launching a sales function at a law firm. Other considerations include revenue expectations, compensation, sales “territories,” ethics considerations, and many others. We are more than 20 years into the advent of professional sales at law firms, and each of these issues has been considered and dealt with successfully. None are show stoppers.

Yes, professional sales are something new for law firms. But those who have done it well agree that hiring an experienced salesperson may be the best thing the firm ever did.