

Law Firm Business Development: Building a Sales Team

By [Silvia L. Coulter](#) on February 23, 2018

Time to take some pressure off the partners. Law firms are woefully behind every other professional services business to hire sales people. A trained sales professional with a successful background will help any firm drive more revenue, capture more client share of wallet, and relieve the pressure the legal professionals face when it comes to developing business. With some exceptions, lawyers hate or at least dislike selling. And, they are generally not as good at it as a solid sales professional. Some firms are realizing the enormous benefits of hiring salespeople and building a sales team. While there may be some initial backlash against management for heading in this direction, the right sales professionals can quickly change partner thinking. **Yes, I'm talking about hiring externally-focused, client-facing sales professionals.** The benefits are significant and those partners who work with seasoned sales pros realize quickly that it makes good sense to have a team to obtain new business that includes the legal pros who can talk substantive law and the sales pro who knows exactly when to move the conversation and the sales process along and close business.

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 firms client contacts and go across the street and do the same thing?" Well, this is what we expect of laterals when we hire them, isn't it? Bring their clients with them across the street. A seasoned sales person may have many industry contacts and can do just that—bring their contacts to the firm and make introductions.

In the same meeting, another dept chair of a 700 lawyer firm stated, "when we first brought Philip in most of our partners were aghast that we had hired a sales professional." "Then all of a sudden everyone wanted a piece of him and one person wasn't enough." "It's amazing how well someone like him works with our partners and how we've increased our odds of winning business by combining his talent with our lawyers' talent." "We now can't imagine not having sales people at the firm."

Want to know how to take your key client teams to another level and really create strategic accounts? Get the help of a sales person who is responsible for client growth. Want to win more opportunities when competing against another firm? Hire a sales professional.

Where does one start? Who does the sales person report to? Start by looking at the firm's most important clients. Which one or two industries is prevalent among those which represent the top 80% revenue? Bring someone in from that industry who has strong and proven experience with selling in that industry. This could be someone from an accounting firm or directly from the industry itself.

The reporting structure can be tricky. Many good and strong sales people would never dream of reporting to a marketing person. A strong marketing person with excellent management/leadership skills will be fine. Otherwise, this individual should report directly to a department chair or the managing partner. Create a reasonable set of goals for year one since it takes time to develop or transfer relationships. After that, a quarterly sales forecast of what he or she is working on is a helpful tool to begin to measure results.

Hiring an experienced sales person may just be the best thing the firm ever did.