

Law Firm Business Development: The Importance of Building Rapport

By [LawVision](#) on May 12, 2014

As we say all the time, “Business Development is Relationship Development.” If this is true (and we believe that it is), those of us who are interested in developing new business should reflect upon relationship development best practices for guidance. This post focuses solely on one key aspect of relationship development that is often overlooked—rapport building. Rapport building is a critical first step in relationship development. Establishing and building good rapport leads to trust. Trust leads to having more open discussions, which in turn, leads to making a connection, which leads to deeper relationships and so on. The importance of building rapport in business development certainly isn’t a new concept as demonstrated by the following;

The farmer, it appears, must not be approached too abruptly. If you are to get his money you must break the news to him gently. You should first talk about horses, soil, and market conditions. This conversation will show that you are interested in things close to him and likewise give you a chance to study his temperament and to learn his likes and dislikes...

Clarence Darrow, *The American Mercury*, “Salesmanship,” 1925

Clarence Darrow is generally regarded as one of the greatest criminal defense lawyers in American history. He clearly understood that effective rapport building is critical to the development of meaningful relationships. However, for various reasons, I’ve noticed that many lawyers simply want to “cut to the chase” and forego the investment in building rapport. For some, it’s of little surprise considering the following excerpt from a *Litigation News* article published by The American Bar Association, addressed to litigators in the context of starting their cross-examination of a witness:

Avoid spending the first minute introducing yourself, asking the witness to speak up if a question is unclear, or exchanging pleasantries. This is wasted time.

Clearly, these teachings are at odds with what I’m suggesting here related to relationship and business development. It’s important for litigators to remember that relationship development isn’t a direct- or cross-examination of a *witness*; it’s developing commonality, mutual understanding, exchanging of ideas, and trust...with *people*. These people can be clients, potential clients, referral sources, colleagues, members of the marketing team, etc. Starting with a good foundation by building rapport will result in more meaningful, mutually beneficial

relationships; business or otherwise.

I offer the following as some fundamental principles to keep in mind as you think about building rapport:

- Demonstrate empathy, warmth, respect and genuineness
- Replace your agenda with their agenda (It's not about you. Really.)
- Mirror the tone of the other person's voice, the rate at which they speak, etc.
- Pay attention to non-verbal communication and react to it
- Use words that you notice they use and do your best to speak their language

Still not sure where to start? Try asking about where someone grew up, how many children they have, their favorite sports team, etc. If you are genuinely interested in the other person and helping them to be successful, the right words will come and the relationship will develop. As the relationship develops, so will the business.

Do any of you have any suggestions on rapport-building best practices that you or your lawyers have used that you'd like to share?