

Ready, Fire, Aim: How to Build an Effective Business Development Plan

By [LawVision](#) on April 5, 2013

A famous architect once designed a home. Upon completion of the project the builder pointed out to the architect that no provision had been made in the plans for walkways around the house and yard.

The wise architect thought a minute and then told the builder to plant grass all around the house. “By the end of summer,” the architect pronounced, “we’ll know where to build the walkways.”

Create Context...Too frequently, law firms, in an effort to boost business, mandate written plans from their attorneys. After considerable angst and frustration the attorney cobbles something together the hour before the deadline and turns it in. The firm checks off the box, the attorney is in compliance, the plan sits in a drawer. Neither the firm nor the lawyer will look at the plan again until the mandate for plans resurfaces again in 12 months. Lather, rinse, repeat – same process, no benefit.

The missing element is context. Too many plans are born in a vacuum void of any practical application, relevance or connection to the real world. So, how do you get “context”? It’s simple, really: Stop planning and start doing. As lawyers we are fairly analytical and logical. We know how to solve complex, thorny issues because we naturally approach problems in an orderly way. This is what trips us up. We just keep planning and don’t act.

Take Action...A better approach for business plans is to first just go out and “do.” Make a quick and dirty list of your best clients, referral sources and prospects, and reach out to them. Take them to lunch and find out what they worry about, send them articles of interest, visit them at their place of business, invite them to meet your partners. After a few weeks of working those lists, ask yourself, “How could I find more people to be on my list?” You’ll think of something – maybe you’ll join an industry group or put on a seminar or give a speech. Don’t think about it too much; just lead with your strengths and act.

Before long, like the pathway around the architect’s home, your plan will unfold. This time when you sit down to create your plan, you’ll have context. You’ll have a much better idea about what works and what doesn’t and, more important, about what you enjoy. Writing down on a piece of paper that you will speak at four conferences or write three articles isn’t very meaningful when you haven’t tied it back to identified targets and your own strengths and interests. Lead with your chin and stumble through a few things first. It’s OK to make a mistake. Don’t get so obsessed with the plan that you don’t act. Activity breeds familiarity, which will eventually build confidence.

Target...Once you have some “on the ground” experience under your belt, begin to think about targets. Whom do you really want to work for? Who are your ideal clients? You can’t really create an effective plan until you know whom you are targeting. Targets need to be narrowly defined. Hint: “Large corporations who may get sued someday” is too broad. A good rule of thumb is to think of groups that gather – groups that have an association. Groups at that level have a community. People in communities come together to listen to speakers, they publish newsletters and they help each other with their careers. If your target market has a community that gathers, you’ve probably narrowed it enough to be effective.

Build Relationships... Once you've identified targets and activities to help you get known in your communities, don't make the mistake of just showing up. Too often lawyers execute on their business plans, attend all the events, give all the speeches, write all the articles and never meet a new person. If the only thing you get out of all those hours of non-billable work is a line in your bio, you've really missed the point. Make sure your plan moves you toward people and relationships. Set goals around strengthening key relationships; don't just go through the motions of an activity. The best way to do this is to tie the plan to an active working pipeline. After all, very few people decide to hire an attorney in the middle of her speech. Use the speech to meet new people, put those people on a list of people you'd like to get to know better, and then begin building trust. In the end, it doesn't matter how much you speak, write or tweet unless you've built trust.

In summary, make sure your plan(s) have context and meaning. Identify specific and actionable targets and build strong relationships over time to become trusted advisors. A focused plan coupled with a high volume of activity will always yield results.

Craig Brown has worked with managing partners, attorneys, CEOs, and executives, as a coach, consultant and business executive for over 20 years. He is a Principal in the law firm growth division at LawVision where his business development consulting and training practice focuses on helping law firms rethink how to build clientele by reconnecting people to their core strengths.

He can be reached at cbrown@lawvisiongroup.com