

The One Tool You Don't Want to be Without for Lawyer Business Development

By [LawVision](#) on November 11, 2015

A colleague asked me recently what I thought was the single most important tool for law firm business development success. "What's the silver bullet?" He asked.

"Easy," I responded, "it's the pipeline."

"Really? The pipeline?... why?"

Here is my response:

1. **Pipelines focus business development on human relationships** – A pipeline is nothing more than a list of people with whom I am trying to form a better relationship included with some notes about what I've done and what I need to do next. My friend [Steve Bell, Chief Sales and Marketing Officer at Womble Carlyle](#) distills the essence of a pipeline artfully, "a pipeline is essentially a list of what just happened and what needs to happen next with each relationship." Prospects don't become clients until a human relationship is forged yet most business development activities focus on giving a speech, writing an article or attending a conference. All good activities to be sure but it's easy to speak, write and even attend and not advance a relationship.
2. **Pipelines are dynamic, business plans are static** – Most people look at business plans once a year or once a quarter at best. Pipelines are designed to be a working list of who is important. They work best when referred to regularly.
3. **Pipelines organize "the interrupted"** – Let's face it, sometimes lawyers just don't have time to develop business. I've been "heads down" in a trial before – exhilarating but all consuming. When lawyers come up for air they need an organized structure telling them what to do next. Pipelines provide that structure.
4. **Pipelines allow you to analyze your network and your progress** – If you track what stage you are in the process, you can tell whether your network needs work on the front end (more new relationships) or on the back end (closing new engagements) – valuable information that breeds efficiency.
5. **Pipelines prompt for next steps** – Just having a list forces you to strategize one by one for the right approach to each of the people on your list.
6. **Pipelines track conversations** – Can't remember your last conversation, the issues discussed, the name of the prospect's spouse? Check the pipeline, if you are using it right you'll probably have that info recorded.
7. **All activity flows from the pipeline** – Pipelines tell you if you need more prospects so you can decide whether you need more awareness activities to uncover new relationships.

Here are some tips to make pipelines a success at your firm:

- **Keep it simple** – All you really need is a name and a place to record next steps and you have a basic pipeline. Start there and then let lawyers add in other suggested categories and columns as they deem them important.
- **Format neutral** – Pushing lawyers in to pre-defined forms and categories stifles adoption rates. Let them build their own categories and systems to accommodate their unique practice personality and organizational habits.

- **Make it about people** – Don't allow pipelines that identify institutions. The idea is to focus on relationships so make sure it is a list of humans.
- **Build habits around it** – Use the pipeline in your meetings with lawyers you are coaching. Let it become the backbone of the lawyer's efforts. Organize your help sessions around people the lawyer is trying to work with. Strategize for optimal next steps and approaches. Encourage them to have the pipeline handy at their desks and refer to it for at least ten minutes every week.
- **Make it a tool, not a leash** – Don't make the mistake of thinking you can roll up all the pipelines in one document and automatically monitor lawyer BD movements. As tempting as that is and as analytics hungry as we all are as marketers, the moment the lawyer gets a whiff that this tool is busy work for them designed to help you, they'll set it aside as fast you can say "failed initiative." First things first – before you decide to monitor activities make sure someone is actually having some activity.

Pipelines are the silver bullet in law firm business development. Create a culture in your firm of maintain and using pipelines regularly and it will make all the difference in your efforts.