

Getting the boot

As legal work becomes more scarce and clients more demanding in the CIS countries, Laird Cenotto gives an inside view on how lawyers get basic training in business development skills

Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have seen an explosion in demand for legal services over the past five years – providing a generation of newly-qualified lawyers with an immense opportunity for rapid professional development and promotion to partnership, especially those who are technically capable, efficient and diligent managers of client matters.

During the boom times, there was enough work for all and the biggest challenge for firms was building and maintaining competitive practice groups in the face of fierce competition. Apart from large bonuses and rocketing salaries for top fee earners, an effective tool for preventing escalating legal ‘brain drain’ was expanding the equity and non-equity partner base.

Implosion

However, business imploded when the global economic downturn struck around 18 months ago, leaving law firm managing partners and senior administrators searching for solutions to the problem of falling workloads. Only months prior, firms were struggling with rapid client base growth and expanding headcounts. But with work drying up, those practices were suddenly focused on controlling costs and securing work. In response, equity partners turned to everyone – and particularly younger partners – encouraging them to bring in new business.

Many of those younger partners on the receiving end of that message in December 2008 went into a state of shock. One



day they were responsible for managing and commissioning work with little client contact; the next they had a whole new set of demands – but they lacked the experience and skill set to achieve those goals. After all, so far their accelerated career paths had forced those young lawyers to leapfrog the staging post where they would have learned how to attract and convert contacts into new clients.

Crash course

Many law firms suddenly found themselves needing a crash course in business development skills. For example, US global practice Baker & McKenzie developed firm-wide initiatives for attorney professional development and client relationship management. Two initiatives – ‘Advancing in

an Economic Downturn’ and multi-module ‘Client Services Principles’ – provide material for each of the firm’s network of global offices to implement these training programmes at their own pace.

On the other hand, so called boot camp business development training is designed to instil business and client development skills quickly and without the distractions of in-house training. Boot camp is a two- to three-day training course usually spread over a weekend that provides a platform for senior lawyers to focus on building these skills. It is intensive and is often compared to total immersion language training.

Boot camp training normally consists of several parts: an introduction or orientation, new client development, existing

Business development



client development, personal selling and coaching – before and after the training – on how to compose a detailed and coherent action plan. The first step during the orientation is overcoming the fear and mystery surrounding business development by explaining what it actually means. Crucially, successful business development depends on understanding and responding to clients' needs.

Every firm wants and needs new clients, but some lack a systematic approach to encourage their lawyers to strengthen current relationships and develop new contacts. In fact, the biggest unknown for most lawyers when it comes to client development is how to approach someone that they may not know or with whom they probably do not have a relationship.

Systematic approach

Many lawyers try to attract new clients by writing articles or speaking at events. This has value, but in boot camp they learn the short cuts to determine which tactics are more effective or how to combine them to save time and effort. They then get to apply some of these new techniques in role-playing exercises.

These short cuts involve exercises that teach lawyers how to combine various tactics efficiently to achieve specific objectives. For example, writing an article can be a useful tactic. But on its own and in many cases it is not the most efficient method since this approach merely demonstrates the author's expertise. But

in combination with other tactics, a more targeted activity emerges that better focuses the business development efforts of lawyers on how to strengthen relationships.

Boot camp introduces a special matrix that grades the effectiveness of various tactics (from highest to lowest) against four major objectives. In general, the objectives are to increase the points of meaningful contact with potential and/or current clients.

Age-old tactics

Historically, business development tactics at commercial law firms in the region had been fairly basic. Explains Jeffrey Forbes, executive director of the Forbes Institute, a Prague-based consultancy specialising in law firm training for the CIS: 'Before the economic crisis, existing client business development for many firms meant picking up the 'phone when the client called to give you more work. And those who thought their clients were more than just cash machines employed the age-old tactic known as client entertainment.'

But in these days of heightened efficiency requirements, clients don't have time to be entertained. If they are lucky they can steal away for a few hours just to attend a professional learning event or to network with their peers. So at boot camp lawyers learn that the key to success with current clients is to understand how to serve them.

It all comes together on the last day when lawyers get to confront their fears in a personal selling role-playing exercise. But few fail at this because in boot camp they learn that selling their legal services is not about persuading a client to buy, but asking them the right questions to get to the heart of an issue or need.

These questions cover areas such as establishing rapport, active listening, uncovering needs, negotiating fees and proposal process. The structure in practice involves two lawyers



facing each other across a table. They each have a detailed script and scenario to follow. One is the buyer and plays the role of a client; the other is the seller and takes the role of a law firm partner.

Role playing

The objective for the lawyer is to work through the detailed script advancing as far as possible over a series of phases in the client conversation. The objective of the client is to assess the role by evaluating the performance of the lawyer with a detailed rating sheet and score card.

The entire personal client care role-playing exercise is divided into two parts. This allows the two participants to switch roles during the second part to give each participant a chance to experience what it is like being in the shoes of the client and the lawyer.

It is not easy to keep a group of lawyers engaged for two or three days of non-stop business development training. That's why a boot camp is designed with lots of role-playing exercises, self-assessments, interactive discussions and even cocktail and canapé settings that allow everyone to experience a real business development environment and to learn from the insights and experiences of others, especially senior attorneys and partners in the firm.

Laird Cenotto is the CIS chief operating officer for US-based law firm Baker & McKenzie. This article is based on a business development boot camp organised for the firm by the Forbes Institute