

Deluge of clients the goal for legal field rainmakers

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In a competitive legal environment, lawyers need to overcome their traditional aversion to generating business and acquire sales skills that allow them to stay ahead of rivals.

That's the starting point for two Philadelphia firms that provide sales training for a profession that hasn't always seen the need to represent itself proactively to clients.

In building a client base, lawyers are constrained partly by a professional code that forbids a direct approach to a person with whom the lawyer has not previously done business. But there is also a reluctance to engage in the sales process because, lawyers traditionally argue, they were trained to be lawyers, not salespeople.

Chuck Polin, president of The Training Resource Group, a Philadelphia-based company providing sales training to lawyers and other professionals, echoed Goldstein's view, noting that most lawyers need to become better listeners before they can be effective sales people.

"We teach the 70/30 rule," Polin said, meaning that salespeople need to be listening to their prospect 70 percent of the time and talking the rest. That doesn't sit well with some lawyers, he said. "Most of them are used to talking 90 percent of the time." Part of the challenge in training lawyers to sell themselves is to overcome negative impressions of the sales process, Polin said. Many lawyers associate sales with ideas like "sleazy" and "dishonest," and don't wish to be associated with those things.

"Attorneys don't like to think of themselves in those terms," he said.

Some also need to work on improving their interpersonal skills because "people like to work with people they like," Polin said. So, TRG's training teaches attorneys how to be more likable and how to get more business out of their professional contacts, a source

that is often neglected. In a sign that supports the need for better interpersonal skills, 9 percent of corporate law departments complain that outside counsel has a patronizing attitude, according to a survey quoted by Rainmaker Trainers. It's likely that those lawyers are simply unaware of the way they are perceived, and so should undergo client service training, the company said. At Rainmaker Trainers, the initial evaluation of participating attorneys includes an analysis of body language and what it says about that person's approach to sales.

But Polin -- who has a background in sales for the apparel industry -- acknowledges that not every lawyer is cut out for sales training; he tries to ensure that all those enrolling on his courses are willing participants. For that reason, his process begins with the evaluation of attorneys who have been put forward by his clients.

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Chuck Polin

Training Resource Group

"Some folks are wonderful attorneys, but they don't possess the willingness to bring in new business," he said. "Some people just sit there with their arms folded. I don't want to poison the well. We are much better with volunteers than with prisoners."

Those who are committed to the training will typically participate in two hours of group training a week for a year, with their colleagues or with lawyers from other firms. They will also get one-on-one coaching that may involve role play in areas designed to take them out of their comfort zone, such as obtaining referrals.

The training shows participants how to get noticed by potential clients, through techniques such as seminars, associations and networking. And it opens their eyes to the benefits of

cross-selling, in which a client of one part of a firm may have legal needs that could be serviced by another division but often are neglected as a source of business.

TRG's training resulted in \$1.6 million in new business for a New Jersey law firm in the first year and \$4 million within three years of signing up, Polin said.

For TRG itself, revenue has doubled from 2003 to the present, and billing in the first quarter of this year was greater than for all of last year, Polin added.

Jo Bennett, a client of Polin's since 2002, credits the training with building her labor and employment law business with Stevens & Lee to the current "low six figures" from "close to zero" three years ago. The initial cost of the training -- between \$6,500 and \$7,000 -- paid for itself in the first year in increased business, she said.

Bennett signed up for Polin's training because she recognized she lacked the sales skills needed to build her client list.

"I didn't have the specific skills that would help me," she said. "You can tell people how wonderful you are, but they just don't want to hear it."

The heart of the training is finding out what clients need, Bennett said.

"You have to be a good listener, and you have to ask questions," she said. "You have to not run your mouth, and that's very hard for lawyers."

Clients no longer come knocking at the door, as they may have done a generation ago, Bennett said, and that means lawyers will have to shed their traditional reluctance to the selling process.

"I suspect that there are a lot of lawyers who say that. But the question is how are they going to survive as a business if they don't sell?"