

Get Retained Before You Get Retained

Featured in the June 10, 2020 edition of the [Edge International Communiqué](#)

By Mike White



Cultivating both relationships and opportunities is a game of quantity and quality. I encourage my law firm business development clients to focus on establishing many discussion threads with prospects, or at least suspected prospects. It's hard to assume you've got a new engagement coming in the door when you have three or four active discussion threads; it's a lot easier to be confident when you've got 12-15 active discussion threads. Active dialogue puts you in a position to be specific and link what you're proposing to do for the prospect to a particular priority they have that falls outside of the job they might want you to do. "Let's plan to have us work on the next deal that looks like xyz, and in the meantime I can help you put together a post-acquisition integration checklist along with your outside management consultant that is helping you absorb the businesses you acquire...."

Common challenges reliably emerge with lawyers who actually engage in a lot of relationship cultivating outreach, namely:

1. They have difficulty establishing a sufficient number of early stage discussion threads. Ideally you should feel pretty overwhelmed with the number of early stage "first" or "second" meeting discussions you are getting calendared – if you're not feeling overwhelmed with inbound front-of-the-funnel activity, then you're probably not spending enough time populating your funnel. I give my clients credit for engaging in outreach to force multiplying "connectors" as well as suspected prospects – connectors lead to prospects!
2. Many well developed discussion threads plateau and it's not clear how to implement a "buying decision."

Relative to item #2 above:

- The key to conversion with a reluctant prospect is getting the company to begin consuming some law firm service or insight **before** they want to "buy" a legal service. The timing here is important- by getting a prospect to consume **anything of value** from you at this stage means you have to be helping the prospect deal with a current "job to be done;" so... make sure you understand fully all of the "jobs to be done" (credit to Clay Christensen, the father of "disruptive innovation" methods) within the portfolio of your prospect. Examples: creating an after-action review process of litigation of a certain type to guide litigation-avoidance business operations training; developing a matter-specific legal project management worksheet to manage matters; building out a library of forms and templates – with companion training – to make the law department more self-sufficient and less reliant on outside lawyers.

- You need to understand the pain points and facts on the ground well enough to propose helping them at the earliest stage – if you're going to persuade a suspect to begin consuming your legal services or insights before they are ready, you'd better be proffering an **intensely** bespoke/customized/personalized proposition reflecting their particulars. Once you learn about all of their "jobs to be done," you are in a position to be helpful. **PEOPLE BUY FROM PEOPLE!**
- Getting prospects to consume any of your work product before a prospect actually wants to "buy" anything also requires you to make this initial experience **very risk free**. Of course, providing them with value-add "freeware" in hopes they will ultimately start paying can be a useful tactic but it doesn't establish your pricing power. Alternatively, get them to validate the value you are conferring by requiring them to pay; give them "off-ramps" to stop consuming (and therefore stop paying) and keep them in control of the way they want to consume your wisdom/work product- prospects need to feel in control.
- Prospects will also bite if the "idea" you propose moves forward a clear near-term priority.

So, think about conversion and decision-implementation in the above terms – combining the back-end conversion strategies with the front-end discussion-thread creation strategies, and you will have a healthy funnel!