



Unnatural Salespeople

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

CLIENT RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

LEADERSHIP

Not all professionals are good at selling their services. The trick is to identify the real reasons why and deal with them.

We have worked with many professionals over the last twenty years and, when it comes to selling their services to new and existing clients, we find they come in four varieties.

There are:

- 1 Those who sell well – and their numbers are increasing
- 2 Those who sell badly – and unfortunately the number of those is also increasing
- 3 Those who can't sell - or think they can't
- 4 Those who really don't want to sell

(Before you read on it might be interesting for you to divide the fee-earning staff in your firm into these four varieties.)

In getting these people to sell and to sell well, one size does not fit all. Each group requires a different management and training solution. In this article we focus on each group and consider how best to work with them.

1) Those who sell well

Identifying those who sell well is not always as simple as it sounds. Some fee-earners will have generated good results in spite of (not because of) the way they sell. Results can be misleading. Some people's success stems more from their technical expertise or their ability to be in the right place at the right time. In cases like these, it would not necessarily be right to hold these people up as role-models for selling legal services well.

Whilst everybody is different and will find their own way to success, there are certain ways of winning work that can be defined as best practice. Adopting these best practice methods increases the chances of achieving sustainable and repeatable success. A firm should therefore measure its fee-earners against agreed best practice criteria and decide who really is in group 1.

Once a firm has determined who fits into group 1, it can encourage the 'right' behaviours and articulate the reasons for these people's success to others in the firm. If possible, time should also be built in for them to pass on their skills to others. This will mean developing these individuals' coaching skills as, whilst they might sell brilliantly, they will usually need help to be equally successful coaches.

2) Those who sell badly

One client, who has obviously experienced those who fit into Group 2 told us: "I wish my accountants would stop selling to me for a second and just listen!"

Notwithstanding this client's comment, some of the people in this group are very successful (for the reasons described earlier) and will be resistant to change. Others may be less successful but very defensive about their capabilities. Many people sell 'badly' because they are self-taught and suffer from the fact that instinct is a poor guide in this area. For this reason this group often proves the greatest challenge, as it is usually more difficult to 'unlearn' behaviour than it is to learn new skills from scratch.

Any training, coaching or development work for group 2 people needs to be carried out by very credible individuals. It also needs to be based around agreed 'best practice' criteria and take into account the sensitivities of the individuals concerned.

3) Those who can't sell/don't think they can

Some people believe that good sellers are born, not made and suggest that those who can't sell should not be involved in selling. The managing partner of a major firm we work with often talks about squirrels and turkeys here! As he says: "If you want to get something from up a tree, you could try using a turkey (the poor sellers), but you're probably best leaving it to the squirrels (the natural salesmen)." We believe he is wrong.

While there will always be variation in potential, our experience tells us that there are far more people who have the ability to contribute to a firm's sales effort than might appear at first glance. Some professionals are condemned as inadequate because they do not fit the stereotype of what a good seller 'should' look like. For example, some people believe that there is a correlation between extroversion and selling. No such correlation exists.

Limiting our selling resource to the people who do it 'naturally' misses out on those who could be very effective with the right development. Also, if all our sellers are of a certain type we risk limiting the range of clients with whom we build strong relationships. We therefore need to define objectively what 'good' looks like. Then it's a case of providing the necessary support that will give each person the chance to use his or her own personality to best effect when winning business. Then, and only then, should we decide who can and who can't sell.

4) Those who don't want to sell

Very few professionals spend years learning their profession with a burning desire to go out and sell. Some see selling as something they would rather not do. Images of used-car salesmen form in their minds. The word 'selling' itself seems to smack of pressure and a lack of professionalism.

However those who are genuinely good at selling legal services know that any kind of pressure selling or 'trickery' does not work. Professionals in group 4 therefore need to be convinced that selling their services well is a very professional and ethical thing to do. To achieve this they need to be introduced to a rigorous, effective and highly professional way of winning business. They need to see that sustained success is based on building:

- a strong reputation and excellent relationships;
- credibility and trust;
- a deep understanding of each client; and, as a result:
- the ability to build each client's motivation to buy or rebuy.

Only after these people are comfortable with what they are being asked to do will they engage with any training or coaching in this area.

Summary

Getting professionals to sell (and to sell well) involves establishing which of the above groups each belongs to and, with that knowledge, (and in the context of a clear and agreed definition of 'good selling' in the firm) providing each with the input required to develop the motivation, confidence and skill necessary for their individual success.



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