

Inside Out > column



By Christina Martini
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By David Susler
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Developing business

Here's another installment of Inside Out with law firm partner Christina Martini and in-house counsel David Susler. They are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married.

Watch for additional discussion on this topic with the Better Government Association's Andy Shaw at chicagolawyer.com.

As the service provider, what are the keys to successful business development and getting in front of potential in-house clients?

Martini: There are many critical components to successful business development and I will mention just a few of them here. First, you really need to know yourself and your capabilities, and you have to know exactly what it is that you are selling. You must also know your audience, the services they are seeking and whether there is alignment between what you are selling and what they want to buy.

It is also important to be genuine in your business development activities — so do not oversell yourself and do not bad-mouth your competition. Also, always strive to do great work, since it will prompt clients to say good things about you and it is invaluable to your business development efforts. Existing clients are usually the best source of new business opportunities and often provide great referrals as well.

In addition, remember the importance of your personal brand, which embodies myriad components such as your image and professionalism; the level of familiarity others have with you and your skill set; and your overall reputation in the legal community. It is important for there to be a certain level of awareness about you among those with whom you are trying to do business.

Finally, understand that building and nurturing your business relationships require a significant amount of time and effort and is a never-ending process.

Just as you need to water plants so that they grow and flourish, you must stay regularly connected to your network to keep those relationships strong over the long run.

Susler: I want to add that this applies equally to the in-house world.

Work does not magically land on our desks. Although the business development challenges may be different, in-house lawyers are responsible for ensuring that work flows to us from the business side.

The key is developing relationships with our business colleagues. Understanding the business context of the advice you are giving is of critical importance.

You accomplish this by never giving legal advice in a vacuum, by understanding how the project and legal analysis fit into the context of your company's business and by understanding what your internal clients face on a daily basis.

If you do this effectively, your business colleagues will consider you a valuable teammate, actively seeking your advice and input.

As the corporate customer, what type of events do you attend where outside counsels might find you?

Susler: Association of Corporate Counsel-sponsored programs are the primary events I attend which are specifically designed to facilitate introductions of outside and in-house counsels.

I also frequently meet other lawyers through my various volunteer activities — not by design but because they are attending out of similar volunteer commitments. Likewise, most of my friends are lawyers and are a mix of

in-house and outside counsels, so I tend to meet lawyers pretty much wherever I go.

How do you make time to meet people face-to-face?

Martini: You just do — plain and simple. It has become increasingly difficult to schedule in-person business meetings, given that technology has made it easier than ever before to avoid them and to use video conferencing, the phone and even e-mail in their place.

Spending time in person with an actual or potential client is the most valuable time there is for getting to know them better and for ultimately generating business.

When these opportunities present themselves, you absolutely have to take advantage of them, even if you are super busy. This is the best way you could possibly spend your time.

What makes a strong first impression when meeting with lawyers you are considering to hire?

Susler: Start with the basics: good eye contact, firm handshake, well-dressed. Those surface qualities need to be supported by underlying authenticity and passion.

When someone is genuine and passionate about what they do, it quickly shows through. Similarly, those who are merely self-serving also shows through.

We have discussed in previous columns that networking is about what you can do for others, not what they can do for you. Someone who genuinely conveys that they are more interested in you will make a strong first impression.

In other words, if you can effectively convey what Tina said about successful business development, you will make a successful first impression. ■

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