Behind Closed Doors: What Professional Service Firms Do Wrong in a Prospect Meeting

By Wendy Nemitz and Dawn Wagenaar

Your firm has spent thousands of dollars developing a brand so that prospects have an awareness of who you are and the kind of services you deliver. Much more may have been spent on advertising and sponsorships to position your message in the right markets. You have spent years developing relationships with a variety of people so they will refer business to you. And it can all be blown in the first few minutes of the prospect meeting.

After years of teaching accountants and attorneys how to market and sell themselves and their firms, we had a sneaking suspicion that many did not walk the talk. So we made a few calls and paid some visits, posing as prospects. This is what we found.

Cold call reality

A lot of CPAs have told us you never get a good client from a cold call. Relationships, they say, are the only way to sell accounting work. A few years ago we had a smart young researcher call 12 of the top 25 CPA firms in our market. We excluded the Big Four and some of the very large regional firms. Her mission was to find a new accounting firm for her boss. She told the accounting firm receptionists that she was looking for an accountant with small business experience because we were outgrowing our bookkeeper and sole practitioner CPA.

Some receptionists were completely perplexed and not able to help since our caller did not request a specific person. One sent her to the marketing person, who was helpful. Very often, she was sent to voicemail, and almost as often, her message was not returned—ever. In a few cases, she left more than one voicemail and it still was not returned. It was not April 12, by the way. We made the calls late in the fall.

Two CPAs who received her calls were good. Both were small-business tax people. After some deliberation she chose one, **Jim Stelzer** of **CBIZ** in Minneapolis, as "best on the phone." We later talked with Jim and confessed our ruse.

"I get clients from cold calls all the time," Stelzer told us. "And our receptionist knows to give those calls to me." Stelzer knew that cold calls can turn into warm clients if you know how to do it well.

Handling calls well

If you want to harvest prospects who call from the phone book or local referral service:

- Train your receptionists and back-up receptionists to transfer calls effectively. Teach them to avoid voicemail and get the prospect to a person if possible.
- Have a few people designated as cold-call receivers. Teach them how to ask questions, or give them a cheat sheet. Encourage them to make an appointment to meet with the prospect as soon as possible.
- Recognize and reward people who are able to take a cold call well.
- Bring all qualified cold calls to marketing so appropriate materials are sent out on time.
- Help your team understand that the best calls may come at the worst times, like right before a tax deadline.

Meet the prospect

Our next phase of research involved in-person meetings with professionals. We set up 10 meetings with law firms in two different market areas. We evaluated every aspect of the experience from whether the directions on the website made sense to how the receptionist greeted us to the actual meeting and follow-up. Most professionals failed.

We found that nine of the 10 seemed to have no system or order for handling a prospect meeting. Most did not prepare and had no information about us or our firm. Most did at least 75 percent of the talking. One did more than 95 percent of the talking. Few asked us for our business directly. While all were nice and friendly, six built virtually no rapport with us as human beings and only three firms followed up with us in any way. Ouch! After all the work and money those firms spent to get a prospective client in the door, we decided we would actually buy from only two.

The two winners—a team of two attorneys and a single young associate—were all under age 40 for certain. The only other attorney we really liked was a younger woman who was paired with a much more senior attorney.

In both meetings with the winners, they took time to prepare by visiting our website and understanding our business. In one case they prepared a custom firm brochure with our logo on it and materials geared only to our industry. All of these young attorneys were genuinely interested in our business and asked a lot of questions about us and what we wanted to accomplish. They took some time to get to know us. The team of two offered to introduce us to clients and contacts and asked if we needed to use their conference rooms while we were in town. Very impressive. We would hire any of these attorneys in a minute.

Curiously, both winners were working at the market-leading firms in their areas. Maybe the market leaders do something right.

Handling meetings

If you want to make sure that prospects say "yes" to you and your firm:

- Hire a secret shopper to make sure your website directions work. Call your reception desk and rate your reception area, including magazines, firm awards and bathrooms. Your favorite receptionist, who has been with the firm for 17 years, may not actually be able to create the impression of the up-and-coming firm you aspire to be.
- Dress your reception area with firm materials and awards or media coverage. If prospects spend 10 seconds there, make sure there is a positive impression while they wait.
- Always prepare for the meeting. Websites make this simple.
- Listen, listen again and listen some more.
- Go with the mindset that you want to learn everything about the prospect, including why they are looking for a new accountant. Make sure you know a lot about them before you say anything about yourself or your firm.
- People assume you have good credentials. They make a choice based on whether they like you and whether they think you will do a good job for them. Do not present your résumé. Focus on connecting with them by being intensely interested in their challenges and opportunities.
- When it is your turn to speak, talk about other clients you may have helped in similar situations. Offer free advice on the spot; it is the only way they will see you know what you are talking about.
- Tell them you are quite interested in working with them and ask when they would like to make a change. Get some specifics.
- Follow up. Although we usually recommend a handwritten thank-you note, one attorney had a thank-you email to us before we got back to the hotel. We were impressed.
- Follow up later. If you have not heard from the prospect, call them again in 10 days. If they are delayed in making a decision, you will be the only one who follows up again.

Remember, anyone who calls about hiring your firm is a "hot" prospect. Make sure you are ready when you get behind closed doors.

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