

Making the right impression – establishing credibility

By Linda Julian

For your business development program to be effective, it's vital that your lawyers are equipped with solid personal marketing skills. And, one important skill area to develop is that of making a positive impact during initial contact with a prospective client or new client.

Watching some lawyers meet new clients is like poetry in motion; with others, their ineptness and the poor impression created causes one to wonder how they were ever entrusted with a matter.

First impressions do count. No matter how competent a professional, you may not get the chance to show what you're made of unless you get through the critical first five minutes of contact with flying colours.

How well you do during these first few minutes is largely the product of planning. Since making the right impact matters, planning the initial contact is worth a little time and mental energy. It may sound corny, but if you're not already a star in this area, you should rehearse.

During the first critical five minutes, your job is to sell yourself. Your proposition - that the client should entrust you with their work - won't get much favourable attention until you've sold yourself.

Where practical, show your genuine interest and service orientation by going to meet the prospective client on their business premises.

Look the part. Not only should you pay attention to personal grooming, but you should look as though you'll be a good "fit". If your prospective client owns a circus, no one expects you to dress as a clown. But the impact will be more positive if you adapt to the circumstances.

Become something of a chameleon: a formal blue pinstripe suit won't help you to look as though you're the right lawyer for the job when you visit the poultry farm !

Arrive on time. Lateness may be excusable, but it won't make the right impression.

Get the body language right: if you're walking into a room, put your briefcase in your left hand, and have your right hand ready to initiate a warm, friendly, and confident (never bone-crushing) handshake.

Don't sit on a low sofa in the reception area, spreading your belongings around and making yourself at home with a magazine. You'll look a disorganised mess as you simultaneously scramble to collect your things and leap to respond to a greeting.

Have your business cards at the ready - slipped into a jacket pocket is ideal. It's not impressive to fumble through wallet, briefcase, or handbag in search of your cards at introduction time.

Take a business card, if offered, and read the name - it will help to imprint it on your mind. (If you're hopeless with names, work on it: buy one of the many excellent self-help books available.)

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Do some background research before your meeting. Your credibility will skyrocket if you understand the prospective clients business and industry, and if you know about the issues, competitive pressures, and statutory environment which they face.

Talking about the prospective clients business environment is the easiest opening to an initial discussion, and the best way to develop rapport. You can plan your opening remarks ahead of the initial meeting: aim to create consensus.

Sound the part: use their industry terminology and avoid your own (legal) jargon.

Your prospective client will want to know about you, too. You'll have made a great start by showing your sincere interest in their business, but you still need to present your credentials confidently. Plan for this, too. It

will impress some clients that you won a university medal but most lawyers will be relieved to hear that this is not the most convincing way to establish your credentials with clients generally.

For most clients, your relevant personal experience (and that of your firm) - solving similar problems or dealing with clients in their industry - is most persuasive.

Be prepared with specific examples of cases you've dealt with and names of satisfied clients to whom they can refer.

Establishing credibility is a fundamental; these ideas for achieving it are simple and basic. Nevertheless, you'll put yourself streets ahead of the competition if you consistently get the fundamentals right.

About the author

Linda Julian is acknowledged as a leading authority on strategic practice development and how to win business for law firms.

Since 1979, she has consulted with lawyers and other professionals throughout Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, and Asia on a wide range of business acquisition, client retention, and strategic management issues.

Her book *The Passionate Professional: creating value, success, and prosperity* has sold in 13 countries and has received wide acclaim. Linda lectures in strategic management and marketing professional services at post-graduate level. She leads the small and highly specialised Julian Midwinter & Associates consulting practice.