

Are you making the right impression?

We all know that first impressions count, but sometimes we can try a little too hard. And creating the wrong impression can be worse than having no impact at all.

Sometimes you need to take a step back and re-evaluate what your brand communications say about you. Somewhere between bland and 'wacky', you know what works – you just might not have seen it yet.

Be remembered for all the right reasons – talk to us about making the right impression.

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The routines of business development

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"You must work very hard to become a natural"

These are the words of one of the greatest golfers that ever lived, the American Arnold Palmer, winner of seven major tournaments. In the same way as a golfer needs to practice to constantly hone his skills, so the budding business developer in the world of professional services needs to get the basics right to ensure success in the field of attracting new clients and looking after those he already has.

How often do you hear people say "Oh, him? He's just a natural at business development." But do they ever actually try to identify what that actually means? There will certainly be an element of interpersonal skills, a level of confidence that comes with experience, as well as understanding of the overall business development objectives and a real sense of ownership of the challenge. However, there are also some simple routines needed to underpin successful execution.

Business development is all about client contact of some form or other: face-to-face, telephone, e-mail etc. The benefits of regular, even if brief, contact are many: i) improved knowledge of the client and his business, ii) more chance of identifying opportunities and iii) greater awareness on the part of the client of what you have to offer.

So how do you make sure you are on top of your contacts? Quite simply, you make a list. As with anything that needs a plan, from the delivery of a major project to revising for exams, you have to build a list of what you are going to do. But this is not a one-off shopping list that you throw away once completed; this is a dynamic, living document, needing constant updating every time a contact is made. Managing lists may not be what the budding business developer wants to be doing with his time, but like the golfer who forces himself to spend time on the practice range, it is something that just has to be done to build the foundations for success.

This does not necessarily involve a sophisticated firm-wide CRM system. The list is an individual's way of keeping in touch with the people that are important to him – a simple record of when to make the next contact and a note of any actions that are outstanding. Whilst each person's list will naturally develop with other elements that the user finds useful, the core is very simple: contact name, date, action.

The dates in the list will reflect a natural prioritisation of effort. There will be important clients where the contacts will be frequent, proactive and personal and, at the other end of the spectrum, those speculative names with less frequent, more passive contact, perhaps via email or newsletters. Your allocation of time spent reaching out to each client will reflect your assessment of the potential for business from that particular relationship.

But how do you build these lists? The key is to keep your eyes and ears open at all times to identify opportunities. Every time you meet someone, you should consider whether they should be added to your list and with what priority.

A story to exemplify this process is that of a partner in a law firm returning from a conference saying how useful it had been – he

had "met a lot of interesting people". When asked to elaborate, he proudly announced that he had collected at least 80 business cards. When pressed further, it turned out that these cards had been consigned to a drawer in his desk with no prospect of seeing the light of day again! What then followed was a simple exercise in sifting through the cards, eliminating any irrelevant ones, putting the key details of the others on a spreadsheet and establishing some simple practices for follow-up depending on potential – a 'good to see you' letter, perhaps with some relevant materials, a quick phone call or email, an invitation to lunch or a to a seminar, or simply inclusion on the Christmas card list. This is all routine work – it is not the extravagant gestures that guarantee sustainable success; it is the routine work that will produce a steady flow of business.

The great business developers do all of this, with their own particular routines built up over years of experience. They may look like elegant swans, apparently gliding towards success with little effort, but you can be sure that there is plenty of paddling going on under the surface – making the calls, sending the emails, just staying in touch. Over time, this effort builds up its own strong momentum.

So, if things are not coming naturally and the business is not coming in through the door, do not despair. Make a list, and keep that list alive. Think of it as the golf practice range for business developers. It may be cold and raining, and you may not feel like going, but you know it is the only way to lower your handicap.

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