

This article originally appeared in PM magazine. For further details go to www.pmforum.co.uk



SALES

**We need to
talk about
the S word...**

Openly embracing a culture of sales will have a direct impact on the bottom line, writes **James Lumley**.

Lee Curtis, Head of Sales at Simmons & Simmons, has taken the firm on a journey. He has successfully managed to make 'sales' a word that is frequently used at work. It has taken time and effort.

For reasons that are cultural, historical, logical and illogical, and while the professional services community in the UK is now generally comfortable talking about marketing, business development, relationship management and even public relations, it doesn't like to mention the five-letter 's' word.

While some fee earners might like to think they don't sell, it is clearly a fiction. The accountancy firms have sales teams that are hundreds of people strong. And as non-accountancy professional services firms become bigger and more complicated, their own marketing and sales teams are growing. There are plenty of people engaged in selling the services of lawyers, accountants, architects and surveyors. And the ultimate point of all product marketing is to generate sales just as the ultimate point of all business is to deliver value to customers.

The simple truth is, sales happens. And like it or not, it's been happening in professional services for as long as professions have been around.

What is sales and how is it changing?

"In the past, partners might say that they weren't doing sales, they were building relationships with targets, clients and potential referrers of work," says Matt Skipper, Head of New Business at Mills & Reeve.

"That," he says, "is sales."

Skipper is clear that in the professional services context, sales is, at its most simple, relationship building. "People buy from people," he says.

Those people, traditionally, have been partners. As a result, marketing departments developed as a way to support partners going into the market and selling the services that they provided. Often, while marketing and BD built the overall firm's brand and worked on strategy, the portion of marcoms that best fitted the description of 'sales' supported the most engaged partners. Thus, they could almost be described as 'rainmaker support'.

But that, he says, has changed. As firms become larger, more complicated, more modern, and more capable, their marketing

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and business development functions are becoming more client-facing. And more strategic.

Matt spends a great deal of time networking, flying the flag for Mills & Reeve.

"I'll be speaking to new and existing connections, learning from them, making introductions, following up and engaging with them. The focus is on presenting a storyboard of why people would work with us as a firm, why we are good at what we do and that we are passionate about it."

This isn't pitching, he says, "it's just talking to people."

From that, he can make introductions to fee earners, and business discussions can happen. It is the opposite of a 'rainmaker support' model.

"We'll then sit with the process until it's secured. We let the fee earner sell their expertise. We sell the concept."

While Skipper's role is to bring in new business, that's only one aspect of sales. Dominic Ayres is a senior client development manager leading the industrials sector team at Eversheds Sutherland. As a client manager, much of what he does is develop existing client relationships. How does he define sales?

"To me, it is a way of strategically positioning your products or services in a way that helps your client or potential client make better-informed decisions about how they will benefit from your services in the future."

He agrees with Mills & Reeve's Skipper that it is a long-term approach.

"My role often focuses on transforming a one-off job into a long-term institutional account. And that takes significant time and dedication. It can take years."

As a large, complex, diversified international professional services firm, a sales strategy that emphasises the development of the firm's existing client base is very important.

This, says Amit Champaneri, Head of Clients and Sales Excellence at Deloitte, reflecting on his past experience, is something that large firms can excel at by leveraging their sales and marketing capabilities along with their professional fee earners.

"For multiple-matrix complex organisations, if you believe in core sales, you can find the right people and the right team [for a client]. It is all about relationship development and adding value for the client."

Ayres points out that this approach is much more effective for businesses of scale and is much more developed in the Big Four accounting firms where the idea of a partner 'owning' a client has become outdated.

"Rather than each partner having hundreds of individual clients, embracing a client-centric culture that concentrates a greater share of the firm's resources on a select few for the client and the firm."

It is, however, different for smaller businesses. "Some firms won't have that base to mine from, so they do need to be more aggressive in bringing in new clients and have more of an obvious 'sales culture'. It's about getting the balance."

professional services firms instinctively shy away from but also doesn't work well in any environment.

It also looks as if people in the firm aren't talking to each other, Ayres says. That might call into question how reliable the firm really is at handling complicated work that might require input from different teams or different jurisdictions.

It is all about trust

Things like this corrodes trust in the firm. And, as Ayres points out, selling a service is often selling an intangible, so trust is paramount. Trust wins new clients, and then trust is built up as that client is serviced.

It isn't the same as in other industries, such as IT, where the product is more tangible and immediate. "It is very difficult to demo something, like you can for software when you run a demo and clients see what they get out of it," he says.

While demos aren't usual in law firms, they aren't impossible.

Lee Curtis of Simmons & Simmons is on a drive to use tried-and-tested sales techniques to create business for the firm and to de-toxify the word itself.

Part of this involves using demos in a practice area that lends itself to the tactic.

"If you look at the firm's suite of Legal & Regulatory Technology products, what we do is very tangible, so I run 15 to 20 demos with clients a week."

That means he spends around 20 hours every week talking to clients and prospective clients, alongside different fee earners. He says that his conversion rate is "respectable". It is a highly targeted play: he knows that around 60% of the firm's existing client base has use for the product, so there is plenty of scope for business.

It is a very similar model to sales in the tech world only "you don't usually ask software developers to sell their products because they probably wouldn't be very good at it," he says.

What can go wrong?

One of the biggest dangers - and one that goes hand-in-hand with the increased size and sophistication of professional services firms - is unfocused sales.

"Being joined up is really important for clients," says Ayres.

"For instance, let's consider a scenario where a US corporate entity has a general counsel based in Europe. If individuals from various locations within EMEA are separately reaching out to that general counsel via email regarding their respective work, it presents a fragmented, uncoordinated, and less-than-optimal image in terms of organisation and professionalism.

"It also looks as if you don't have the client's interests in mind," he says.

In fact: it looks as if the firm is trying to exploit a relationship to make money. That is the sort of 'sales' that



It is hard to tell hard-working millionaires that they are doing everything wrong, or even that they could do things better.

Like Mills & Reeve's Matt Skipper, he is directly spearheading sales to clients, bringing in fee earners when they are needed, and not the other way around. While not traditional in law firms, it is standard practice in the outside world.

He's also happy to push the envelope to make it clear that 'sales' is not a dirty word.

"I'm starting to apply things like Black Friday deals and bulk discounts," he says. "It is really confronting for some of my legal colleagues because they say it devalues what they do," he says.

"But it isn't – I'm just tapping into the psychology that the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry has been applying successfully for years - that human beings love to think they are getting something for nothing."

Because of this approach, "the word 'sales' now permeates Simmons & Simmons in a way it did not five years ago."

Does he have buy-in? "It is 20-60-20," he says, quoting a sales adage. "Twenty per cent recognise it for what it is worth and are behind me, 60% are a bit more cautious, but over time we will convert them. Twenty per cent are never going to be convinced, but that's fine."

And the open discussion about sales creates an environment in which difficult questions about who is really best placed to drive sales can be addressed.

Curtis points out that successful salespeople often have high levels of emotional intelligence while being thick-skinned enough not to be put off when their first few phone calls don't generate traction. They are also comfortable with risk. Many excellent lawyers don't display all, or any, of those characteristics.

By having an open debate about sales, Curtis is creating an environment in which it is more permissible to share sales roles between partners and professional salespeople, something that, Amit Champaneri points out, clients have been doing for years.

"The clients get it," he says, "and after a while, partners often have a 'step back' moment when they realise that we really add value to the relationship.

"Sales is not a negative word," he says. "Let's embrace it."

Tips from the professionals

"I can only cover so much with my sales team," says Simmons & Simmons' Lee Curtis.

Ultimate success in his role, he says, is not to replace swathes of fee earners with a salesforce. While a bigger sales team would be good, upskilling fee earners early in their careers to understand and embrace sales would be even better.

Fee earners are, after all, the most important client interface there is, as they are the people the clients are paying to work with.

So, what can fee earners do to improve their sales technique? In short: listen more and better, consider the client's point of view, don't be put off, and talk to clients.

"One of the things I always tell our teams," says Mills & Reeve's Matt Skipper, "is to pick up the phone. Don't just send emails, pick up the phone. It's such an important part of the sales process.

"During the pandemic, we were encouraging lawyers to pick up the phone and see how their contacts and clients were getting on, not to ask for work. This supportive activity generated huge amounts of goodwill with those contacted. Continuing this approach now reaps huge rewards."

It is a type of relationship building that professional services fee earners can find uncomfortable, but, says Eversheds' Dominic Ayres, fee earners really should be calling their clients for a catch-up every week.

"Often they say that their clients are busy, or they have nothing to say, or they don't have any work to give. But then sometimes I call up a client and they say, 'you are the first one of our law firms to call us about this. Let's talk.'"

This, says Ayres, is proof that phone calls build business relationships.

It isn't just talking that is important. 'Active listening' is also key.

It is common for clients while talking about one problem to mention another. Curtis says that often fee earners don't pick up on this and instead steer the conversation back to the topic at hand, ignoring a sales opportunity.

Ayres adds that those that do 'hear' the new problem, might try and offer a quick solution, such as setting up a call with another fee earner. The real answer, Ayers and Curtis both agree, is to say 'tell me more,' and then listen.

This both builds a relationship and elicits information that will make the follow-up call more relevant to the client's needs. It also might lead to the client revealing more problems in search of solutions.

A client-centric, rather than firm-centric, approach is also critical.

"Often, firms will write sales plans in a sort of black room," says Ayres. "They might say we want to win all their global M&A work or grow our fees by 10%."

That is firm-centric. Instead, they should be researching what the client does and plans to do and tailor their offering accordingly.

This is something, Ayres says, he does regularly in his role that builds a real partnership with the client compared to creating objectives without consulting with the client.

"If every conversation about sales begins and ends with the client, you are going in the right direction," Ayres says.

Resilience is also key. Curtis points out that one should not be put off when the client doesn't respond to a fee earner's "one and only email".

But really, the key is for fee earners to be open to 'sales' and accept it as a tried and tested part of business life.

"We should enable fee earners, from trainees onwards, to be active and open listeners, to have greater awareness of what is going on in the firm and outside, and to get sales right," he says.

"We've got 1,700 lawyers at Simmons & Simmons. Just imagine if we upskilled them all by just 10%. The opportunities would be huge.

"There are tens of millions of pounds available."



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