Beyond Referrals Newsletter Volume 4.3

Creating a selling process may take a lot of time, but managing one does not. This issue is about the realities behind "I'm too busy to sell".

Volume 4.3 Selling Consulting When You're Too Busy Consulting

Have you ever wondered what other management consultants are doing to sell their services when they're busy?

Last month in Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton I met with consultants and gained some new insights into their challenges, and shared some solutions for balancing selling and delivering. The following is a summary of those presentations along with some of the comments I heard about consulting in these hot markets.

"I'm Too Busy To Sell" – What This Really Means

When I hear this from a client I never take it at face value. This can mean a lot of things so before you determine how your firm can sell when you're "busy", you need to take an honest look at what you really mean when you say "I'm too busy to sell".

Let's begin with the obvious. Maybe it's true - you just can't add another thing to your day. While that may be fine in the short-term, in the long-term you know it's a recipe for professional burnout and revenue shortages. You need to make changes. If you're burning the candle at both ends to deliver super-profitable work then build in down-time at the end of the project. If you're working hard because the work has slim profits and you need to deliver a lot of it, then you've got a margin challenge, which is an indicator of a positioning problem. You will have to identify which problem you have so you can take the appropriate action.

The next option is that you may simply decide to choose other more desirable activities over selling. I'm a big fan of work life balance and think that smart consultants should be rewarded with profit margins that purchase family summer homes, baseball season tickets, and the time to enjoy both. But the sales and profit have to come first. Making time to sell will ensure that it does.

Third, sometimes “I’m too busy to sell” really means “I hate selling”. By deferring to the holy grail of “billable hours” consultants can avoid the guilt (and the attention of their managing partner!) of not doing a task they should be doing. If this is you then I suggest you start with eliminating your discomfort with selling. It can be done.

The fourth interpretation is the most common and it translates to “I don’t know how to sell” or “I don’t know what I should be doing right now”. This speaks to a lack of meaningful selling process in your firm, as much as it speaks to the lack of selling skills in the individual consultant.

So maybe it’s possible that your time problem is really a knowledge or process problem. If so, better days are just around the corner. The next little bit of information is your place to start.

Selling Does Not Take A Lot of Time

Learning to sell takes some time. Setting up business development processes and infrastructure takes time.

But the act of selling does not take a lot of time.

Once you adopt this as your mantra, the sell or deliver conflict goes away. You will never again be “too busy to sell”. You’ll also notice that once you have acquired the skills essential for selling consulting, and set up the infrastructure and processes, the other reasons hiding behind “I’m too busy to sell” often go away as well.

Good selling yields higher margins meaning more time to manage your business or be with your kids. Good selling makes people comfortable selling, and good processes mean consultants always know what to do when they have time.

So if selling does not take a lot of time why are sales cycles in management consulting so long?

Selling Does Not Take A Lot of Time – But Buying Does

Buying professional services is a journey for a potential client. They begin at a stage where they do not know you exist, and progress through stages of uncertainty and preparation to a final stage where they are signing your estimate and writing a deposit cheque.

Potential clients can fly through these stages in minutes but that is very rare. More commonly they take weeks, months, or years to progress through the buying cycle.

Do you know how to treat buyers at each different stage? If so then you will optimize your time spent on each opportunity. If not you will waste valuable time achieving very little.

Let's look at an example.

"Hi. I'm A PC." "And I'm A Mac."

You all know this commercial. It's the one where the unobservable characteristics of different computers are illustrated using two different people.

So now instead of two people representing two different computers in a television commercial, think of four different people standing in a line with each one representing a different stage in the buying process.

Each has a very different perspective on buying and therefore must be treated differently.

The earliest stage buyer (let's imagine the one on the far left) has no clue why they might want to hire your consulting firm and probably knows very little about how you help your clients. This person needs you to help them understand how clients are better off after they work with your firm.

The late stage buyer on the far right is someone that is hiring a consultant right now. This person understands why they need to do this, they want to do this, and they want it to happen quickly.

The late stage buyer on the far right wants to hear about process, deadlines, deliverables and the people on your team, but if you started speaking about those things to the early stage buyer on the far left you would instantly be branded a pushy sales person instead of a respected consultant.

If you have ever felt uncomfortable selling it's likely because you said or did the right things – just at the wrong stage in the buying process.

Have you ever wished you could take back the time you spent writing a proposal for a potential client that never acted on that proposal? This is the type of inefficiency that comes from using the right sales tactic at the wrong time.

(One of my clients described this as "pulling a Freddy Fender". I assume he was referring to Freddy's big hit, "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights.")

The View From The Trenches

Selling while your practice is busy is a hot topic in western Canadian consulting circles right now. This was evident by the strong attendance at the three presentations as well as by the most common question I was asked over the three days - “What tactics should I use to sell when I am busy?”

That’s a fair and reasonable question – but one for which I do not have a universal answer. The answer will always be contingent on the situation – to whom are you selling, and where are they in the buying process. And without an understanding of a potential client’s buying process, and how they require differ things from sellers at different stages of that process as described above, there can never be an intelligent answer.

Let me expand on this.

The Internet is loaded with advisors promising us how we can “cold call our way to millions”, or “build a practice on referrals alone”, or “ride the wave of search engine optimization”. Ad agencies will tell you that paid media is the way to go.

While all of these are legitimate tactics, they are useless at worst, or inefficient at best if we (i) we rely on them exclusively; (ii) we use them at the wrong time in the buying process or (iii) don’t understand how to weave these disparate tactics into an holistic selling process. The utility of these approaches will be maximized by applying them at the right time, in the right way, for the right buyer. They will be minimized by using them all the time, or at the wrong time.

What’s Up On The Web

Another issue discussed heavily by busy consultants seems to be the notion of increasing web traffic. Let me provide some background on this.

Your web site is the first place a potential client visits, once they have heard of you and determined that your firm may be relevant to them. It’s not a place to close deals with clients. Clients go to your site because they have heard about your firm, and want to learn more about your expertise transforming firms like theirs. Increased traffic on a consulting web site is primarily an outcome of other awareness raising events like speaking, writing, etc.

However - if you want to use your web site as the first point of introduction to your firm then there is no better tactic than an online campaign. There is no doubt that online tactics drive web traffic much more efficiently than traditional media. And that can be as simple as a well-written e-mail to a potential client you have never before met.

The caveat here is that while online consumer advertising and e-mail list rentals are quite well developed, I have not seen the same level of quality and availability for B2B campaigns.

Online advertising is a very unique type of expertise and to do this effectively you need to hire an expert. I am not that expert but keep checking the BR Blog (http://www.beyondreferrals.blogspot.com/) as I will be using the blog to let consultants across North America know about opportunities and options relevant to them.

First - Learn To Sell. Then - Get Help Selling.

Related to all of this, and the question that I am asked frequently is "Can consulting firms outsource selling?" The answer is no. Consulting firms cannot outsource selling.

Selling will always have to be owned and managed by someone in the firm. What can be outsourced though are parts of the selling process like online advertising and even telephone introductions and appointment setting.

But how effective the outsourced components will be, will always remain a function of the quality of the model that guides them and unifies them into a selling process instead of a series of unrelated selling tactics.

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Watch for registration info coming up soon for Beyond Referrals speeches for The Harvard Business School in Chicago on September 13, 2007, and the Chicagoland Chapter of the Institute of Management Consultants September 14, 2007.

Beyond Referrals has been selected by the Institute of Management Consultants as an "IMC Recommended" professional development program.