MASTERCLASS

The extra mile

Pippa Blakemore of The PEP Partnership discusses how to create and implement a successful client relationship strategy and plan

FIVE THINGS YOU WILL LEARN FROM THIS MASTERCLASS:

1. How to get the fundamentals right from the start
2. How to ensure plans support firmwide strategy
3. Who to involve in each client relationship plan
4. How to grow and strengthen client relationships
5. How to win more work from existing clients

It costs approximately nine times more to win new work from a new client than from an existing client. Unfortunately, as a relationship with a client matures, boredom can set in and the client can feel taken for granted or even neglected. This means that he is more open to approaches from competitors hungry for new business. As such, it is ever more important to have a client relationship management strategy and plan.

The aim of the strategy is to create, generate and take advantage of each opportunity that exists to win more work from clients. It's a structured and systematic programme for keeping in touch with current, past and dormant clients. It requires you to evaluate where you are now, clarify where you want to be and allocate the time and financial resources needed to get there.

Every client relationship management strategy supports the implementation of the firm's overall business strategy. This includes contributing to the achievement of overall objectives such as:

- the number and type of clients needed;
- the practice areas and jurisdictions to develop; and
- the turnover and profitability desired.

Clients continue to instruct lawyers they like, trust and with whom they have a valued relationship. Having a plan helps to develop, nurture and grow a relationship with each client.

The plan ensures that the first person a client thinks about is you if he has new instructions or work, because you are the last lawyer he has heard from. It avoids the common complaint from clients that "the only time I hear from my lawyers is when they are billing me".

Another complaint which can be avoided is a client feeling that he is the last person to know what you are doing. For example, when lawyers visit clients, one of the most common phrases is: "I didn't know you did that".

Other types of complaints can be diffused. Regular, structured and two-way

FIGURE 1: SAMPLE CLIENT RELATIONSHIP PLAN

Name of client:____________________ Review date: ____________________

Name of client relationship partner:____________ Version no.: ____________________

Name of manager:____________________

Objectives of each activity	Activity	Who to be involved from our firm?	Budget	Who from their organisation?	Date
Demonstrate understanding of client business	Send article on last week's judgment with a personal comment	Client relationship partner		Head of legal	
Demonstrate we are genuinely interested in their business, even though they are not instructing us at present	• Meet to discuss how things are going. • Telephone and ask "how's things?"	All levels at the firm		Matching levels of seniority	
Demonstrate that we are associated with high-profile clients	Themed lunch with others at their level of seniority	Managing partner		MD/ FD/head of legal/senior management team	
Demonstrate we continue to be good to work with and have a common interest	Sporting event, e.g. skittles evening	1-3 years qualified			
Demonstrate respect for the client	Ask for them to provide a comment or quotation for an article	3-8 years qualified			
Cross-selling	Meet partners and managers	Client relationship partner, then relevant heads of department		Those responsible for allocating legal resources	
Ask for feedback		Client relationship partner, managing partner and senior partner			After matter

communication with clients in a range of scenarios should be incorporated into the plan, enabling you to pick up any areas of discontent before they become a major problem.

The plan can be targeted to the most appropriate clients. For example:

- **Analyse client billing history.** In the past, have they paid promptly, in full and without argument?
- **Analyse whether there is potential for growth.** Look at where you are providing legal services for clients currently. Is there potential to provide additional services?
- **Analyse the potential for cross-selling.** This can be incorporated into the client relationship strategy.

Developing a strategy and plan

It's important to manage the process closely by choosing up to three clients for which you would like to develop a specific and personal client relationship management strategy.

For each of these clients, appoint a client relationship partner who is responsible for the implementation of an overall global strategy for the client organisation, if required. In addition, appoint a client relationship manager who is responsible for the development of the plan. These two people need to work closely together in order to provide the motivation, drive and determination to implement the plan in order to make it successful.

Involve every lawyer in the team that services the client so that each individual is committed to implementing the plan successfully. Each firm lawyer should be encouraged to develop relationships with in-house counsel at his own level of seniority within the client organisation. As the lawyers progress up the law firm in seniority, so their in-house counterparts will progress up the ranks in their organisations. These client contacts may even leave to join other organisations, which will mean that relationships will not only be developed within the existing client organisation but possibly also within other organisations.

The plan needs to be simple, structured and flexible. There should be an overall plan for the whole client and then each individual lawyer should have a personal plan based on the same structure, which targets particular in-house counsel within the client. These should be flexible enough to be adaptable to changes within the client and also to changes within the firm. It is an action plan, so it should be reviewed, readjusted and added to regularly.

> **"Each lawyer needs to be set appropriate targets for his level of seniority, all of which contribute to the overall targets within the firm's client relationship plan"**

See Figure 1 for a blank sample plan for a key client.

Measuring results

Targets, measures of success and recognition of achievement should be included. Contribution needs to be recognised in appraisals. Each lawyer needs to be set appropriate targets for his level of seniority, all of which contribute to the overall targets within the firm's client relationship plan. It's best to do this using SMART targets which are Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Results-bound and Time-driven. These need to be measured at regular intervals.

There are two elements to measuring results which need to be incorporated into the client relationship plan:

1. **Activities –** such as the number of events attended and telephone calls made; and
2. **Financial results –** such as the number and value of new instructions.

FIGURE 2: KEY MARKETING METHODS AND IMPACT ON CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Level	Characteristics	Occasions and examples
1 Integrated ⇌	One-to-one personal (leading to more instructions)	• Personal email: short, focused, relevant • Visits to their/your offices, rooms, factories • Feedback meeting • Invite to contribute to an article • Invite to speak at a firm event • Invite for a comment/quote for an article you are writing
2 Two-way ⇔	Groups to groups (promoting general relationships)	• Themed lunches • Opera, ballet • Sporting events • Celebrations • Closing dinners • Post court lunches • Wine tastings • Reception, party, drinks, dinner • Small, specific, repetitive, targeted events e.g. running training • Secondment • Contribute to a survey • Imaginative and creative events
3 One-way, focused, opportunity for two-way →	Lawyer to groups (megaphone marketing)	• Presentations at conferences, seminars, workshops • Training seminar • LinkedIn, Zing, Plaxo, Twitter
4 One-way, unfocused →	Active name promotion and profile raising (one way communication from lawyers outwards)	• Newsletters • Non-personal follow-up • E-Christmas cards • Brochures • TV/radio/media/articles • Blogging • Authoritative commentator • Twitter
5 Background —	Subliminal name promotion (background awareness)	• Key rings • Sponsorship • Mouse mats • Pens • Mugs • Mats • Calendars • Pro-bono work

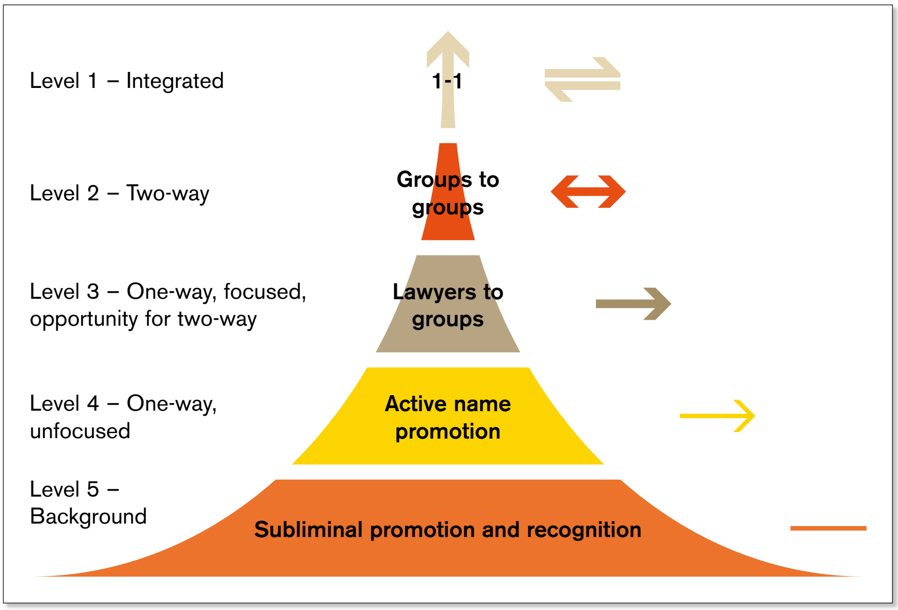
Each lawyer should keep a record and pass to on to the rest of the team anything that a client ever says to him. This may be about the work in progress, but also might be about what's happening to him, whether he is going on holiday, has been ill, has just had a baby, or has just broken a leg.

Part of implementing a successful plan is listening, being spontaneous and ensuring that everybody in the team knows what is going on with that client. Every client wants to feel that they're the only client in the world.

Keeping in touch on a regular basis is fundamental to the success. One way is to have a regular "how's things?" telephone call. Very often, lawyers say that they may not have anything to say to a client. It is important to reverse this perception because, although you as lawyer may not have anything to say to the client, he may have a lot to tell you.

In addition, the client may have work for you which, if you don't phone, you may not get. One of the best rainmakers I know spends half an hour every morning telephoning clients, contacts, referrers and

FIGURE 3: LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION TO DEVELOP AND STRENGTHEN CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS



intermediaries and simple asking "how's things?" He refers to previous discussions, conversations, meetings, encounters and matters to ensure that he is able to ask interested and open questions.

Figure 2 analyses the key marketing methods and the extent to which they will help to promote client relationships. However, there may be exceptions. For example, an article may produce instructions or Level 3 communications can be promoted to Level 1 by personalising it.

Figure 3 indicates the activities which promote the growth of relationships with current clients. Level 5 indicates subliminal name promotion and recognition, while the top of the triangle indicates the greatest opportunity for winning more work from existing clients.

Overcoming common pitfalls

- **Pitfall 1: Trying to do too much.** Only prepare and implement plans for one to three clients at first. Monitor their success from the client's perspective and also from the ability of the lawyers to manage the implementation. Have objective discussions and feedback and apply what has been learnt to the next group of clients.

- **Pitfall 2: Generating too high expectations.** Do not promise what you cannot deliver – this includes making promises on behalf of others and underestimating how long things will take to do.

- **Pitfall 3: Using the wrong level of communication** (see Figure 3). This includes emailing when you should be telephoning and sending a mass newsletter (Level 4) to hundreds when you should send two or three personal lines to key clients (Level 1).

  For example, one client said: "I do not want any more newsletters. If anything relevant and new arises, I want the law firm to send me a few bullet points (less than one screen, so that I do not have to scroll down) on how it will affect my business and what action I should take".

- **Pitfall 4: Lack of communication within a firm.** For example, three departments in one firm sent three different invitations to the same people to attend separate events on the same night, at the same time.

- **Pitfall 5: Not really understanding the client's needs.** One client said that he knew everything about his organisation's area of law, which meant that he was more authoritative than any external law firm. What he needed was advice on the peripheral areas of law which impacted on his business but upon which he was not up-to-date, such as employment law.

- **Pitfall 6: Assuming the client organisation is one big amorphous mass,** rather than one containing several in-house counsel with their own personal preferences. It is important to have a strategic plan for the client organisation as well as individual plans for each firm lawyer and in-house contact.

> **"Part of implementing a successful plan is listening, being spontaneous and ensuring that everybody in the team knows what is going on with that client"**

- **Pitfall 7: Not generating curiosity in communication.** An email with the subject line 'I love you' was one of the most successful computer viruses because so many people (including rational lawyers) wanted to know who loved them.

  I am not suggesting that this should be a precedent, but it underlines the point that the subject heading needs to generate curiosity and have a positive and constructive answer when clients ask questions like: 'so what?' 'who cares?' and 'what's in it for me?'

- **Pitfall 8: Not appreciating that all your daily communications are part of a client relationship strategy.** Too often anything to do with marketing and business development is seen as 'not proper work' and perceived as separate from chargeable work. Daily work and communications (including phone calls, emails, bills and letters of advice) are part of implementing the client relationship management strategy and plan. mp

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