

## **The Business Development Express is About to Leave the Station – Will You Be On It?**

By George Brandon

*September 2010*

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It's not too early to start thinking about business development for 2011. One of the most important aspects of putting together a business development plan is identifying and tracking your contacts.

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At the beginning of the year everyone had (or should have had) their business plan finalized, including details of the things they had planned to do throughout the year to strengthen and build their business. Some are more detailed than others, but there is one thing that most business plans have in common: half the year has passed and the majority of action points are incomplete or haven't even been started. I can almost hear the response of those reading this article: "I have been busy practicing law. Business development can wait until a window appears for me to take action."

I recently read an article by Bronwen Maddox in the August 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the *London Times* which caught my attention. It reported that, in the U.S. today, there are 1.1 million lawyers – in other words, one lawyer for every 279 people. A sobering thought, which should cause every attorney to focus on the importance of filling the "funnel" to keep business flowing. It is now more important than ever for attorneys to devote time every week to work on their business plan and keep the momentum going, but how many attorneys actually set aside time for this in their calendar? The ones that do will catch the business development express, and the ones that don't will be left on the platform. The first thing to do, after reading this article, is to set time in your calendar on a weekly basis for a meeting with yourself to work on your business plan.

Every business plan will vary in content, but every plan must have, at its core, a systematic approach to contact management and relationship building. Contacts are the source of new and repeat business, but the majority of attorneys have never developed an efficient method for recording, managing and developing their contacts all in one place. The contact management system must include both personal and business contacts. Your personal contacts should include family, friends, professionals (such as doctors and dentists), and vendors. Your business contacts should include your clients, prospects and everyone you meet.

Most law firms provide tools which they encourage attorneys to use to manage their contacts, the most popular being Outlook, Interaction and Contact Ease. Unfortunately, these systems are never used to their full potential, which means that attorneys miss opportunities and law firms lose valuable income. The problem is twofold: first, many attorneys are guarded as to what information they share with the firm's database, as they are very protective of their contacts and who talks to them; and second, they do not wish to enter their friends, family and social contacts. Because many attorneys still consider their contacts to be part of their own book of business, they want to bring their contacts with them wherever they go, and they do not want to share their contacts' details.

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Understandably, law firms are desperate for details of all their attorneys' contacts, both to develop cross-selling opportunities and, in the event that an attorney moves to another firm, to have the opportunity to continue marketing to that attorney's contacts. Looking at the big picture however, while firm-wide systems are necessary for marketing purposes, all attorneys should also be encouraged to maintain their own comprehensive system. As contacts become clients, the firm gains the income and the contact information. Both attorney and firm gain from the success and the more successful the attorney, the more likely they are to stay with the firm that supports their business.

So what should the personal contact management system contain, and what should you do with it? Your goal should be to have a portable system that travels with you, and contains full contact information for everyone you know. Remember the "six degrees of separation" principal: everyone is at most six steps away from any other person, so that a chain of, "friend of a friend" statements can be made to connect any two people in six steps or fewer. Put all of your contacts together to make such connections, and never forget anyone. Like you, your contacts are constantly meeting new contacts, and you never know who might be able to help you make a great business connection.

Along with each contact, you need to record what "activities" you are doing with them, and most importantly, what you are planning to do with them and when. Your system has to become more than just an address book, it has to become a business development tool that you use every day.

Everyone has different ways of working, but you should consider creating lists of:

- contacts you need to have lunch with;
- contacts where dinner is more appropriate;
- prospects;
- current clients;
- "watch" contacts that consist of contacts and companies to monitor;
- top priority contacts;
- contacts that should receive holiday cards

Use these lists to manage your business development activities.

To support your business plan, you also need to create an action plan for each contact. Next, enter against each contact individual action items, including what you plan to do and when. Creating "reminders" in your contact system (or even in Outlook) will prompt you, at the right time, to take the appropriate action. If circumstances change, alter the reminder date or time accordingly and follow through. Look at your reminders every day and if you are unable to complete a task, reset the reminder date. Avoid letting them expire as each one could be a lost opportunity.

Your goal should be to keep in regular contact with the people that can help you maintain and strengthen your business. Be targeted and focused in your approach. Make sure you not only get on the business development express, but are the first to exit the train when it arrives at your destination.

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## About the Author

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