



Water the Bamboo: Positioning Relationships for Growth

Business Development Best Practices Series

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The Mastery

“You did it! It’s been a long journey and we finally have a contract. RING THAT BELL!” These are the words that the President of your small General Contracting firm said as your office gathers in the conference room in honor of signing your first contract with a client you’ve been chasing for years. Wouldn’t this be nice? Although most Business Development (BD) professionals long for this, most experience the frustration of no immediate return. But BD is all about nurturing relationships, connecting people, and being strategic while being genuine. And mastering this takes time...and patience.

Think of it like a Timber Bamboo. The bamboo seed acclimates to its new home, and then takes two to three years to establish in that new environment. During the first couple of years, the Bamboo Farmer waters it, but sees no above ground growth. With patience, the third year brings excitement and it can grow 90 feet in 60 days. That’s a foot and a half per day! But what was the plant doing all those years? Taking a deeper look (literally) the Bamboo Farmer will find a web of roots, spanning over 100 yards. The bamboo was busy using the resources it was collecting to build a deeply connected network to enable exponential growth.

The Watering

Once a firm has identified which new market, client, or location they want to pursue, it’s time to do some watering and expand those roots. This time is the most critical part of securing a new project. The path to landing a project can be torturous—taking months even years of wooing the client(s) before a deal is closed. Before you take the President of the prospect company out to lunch, you must do research. Extensive research.

Learn the history of the client—how they got started, where they want to go, what their values are, how do they treat their employees, etc. You also want to research to see if they will collaborate well with your company and will also treat you well. Have they paid their bills on time, what do other contractors say about them, or what does their strategic plan look like? A simple Google search will answer many of these questions.

To get the real answers you must insert yourself where they are, because, let’s face it: it’s all about them, NOT you. If the procurement manager sits on the board of directors for the local chamber, start volunteering and serve as a non-voting member to get to know her. If the Marketing Director enjoys attending yoga at the Y, buy a yoga mat and start to enjoy yoga, too. Be a detective and friend, not a salesman. No one wants to do business with someone who talks only about themselves and throws brochures in your face every time you see them. It’s also a great time to reach out to the network of people you’ve been building. Ask someone who knows them for an introduction.

A typical sales process includes 13 stages, from the moment a client is aware of your services to the client becoming loyal and using those services repetitively, which can be viewed in detail in the Society of Marketing Professional Services Markendum: Domain 03, Client and Business Development (2016).

Very large construction firms have a dedicated marketing department to manage the sales process, to ultimately become the “sole source” firm. However, most construction firms rely on a single BD professional or on their Project Managers to build relationships, typically beginning with a proposal submission, and mark success when they sign a construction contract. Granted, there may have been other Bamboo Farmers watering this seed long before you saw the RFP or Bid, and you missed the ball on what their hot buttons were because you did not take the time to get to know the client.

The Growth

You joined the local Chamber of Commerce and sat on the Membership Committee to meet the new Intern of Hospital X. Fast forward two years and you and that Intern (who is now a Project Manager) are best friends and talk about

everything. One day, he tells you that the hospital needs a new mental health ward due to overcrowding and will issue an RFI this fall. You submit your proposal because you know what the client truly cares about, and you win. Finally. You have a construction contract with the client, and you didn’t even have to take the President out to lunch!

By this time your bamboo has grown a few feet. Over the course of the next couple of years, you win more projects. Continuing the BD effort is essential. Keep in the know of their wants, needs, and overall satisfaction of your services to secure more work.

The Reward

You wouldn’t ask someone to marry you on the first date, so take the time to learn more about the client or project. Invest time, money, and effort to research the client. To become a master BD professional in this highly competitive construction world you need to become a Bamboo Farmer because patience, persistence, and self-discipline foster successful and rewarding results. If you think that landing a new client is the reward, think again. It’s all about maintaining that relationship with the current, loyal client who pays on time, gives you great testimonials, and who shares your experiences. So, once you’ve gone through the whole sales cycle with the client, don’t stop your BD efforts just because you got the project.

Existing clients are an important concentration of the BD/Marketing strategy because not only can they provide the most income for the fewest marketing dollars, they are also responsible for the majority of your revenue. The Pareto Principle, or the 80/20 Rule, states that 80% of your sales come from 20% of the clients. So, don’t water new bamboo unless you have to — keep watering the bamboo that you already have and make sure it’s happy in the environment where it grew.

About the Author: Pearl-Grace Pantaleone has over four years in the A/E/C industry, previously serving as a Marketing Coordinator for engineering and architectural firms. She is currently the Business Development & Marketing Manager at Cornerstone General Contractors, where she oversees all marketing campaigns and business development efforts. Prior to joining the A/E/C industry, she came from a background in journalism and broadcast news. Her local Alaskan roots have aided in her success, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Public Communications from the University of Alaska—Anchorage.

