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# Its Time To Change Your Story About Business Development

Business Development Best Practices Series

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I've witnessed many A/E/C and environmental consulting professionals and firms shroud the topic of business development in a level of mystery and complexity that's just not serving them well.

In fact, when I conduct training, I ask people to share what comes to mind when I say the words "business development." Often what I hear is that business development is salesy and reserved for extroverted, outgoing people who like to play golf. In other words, many folks are telling themselves a lot of false stories about business development.

So, in this article, we're examining what business development is—and is not—and what it really takes to succeed at it. I truly believe that anyone can learn the skills and develop the mindsets needed to be great at business development. Here are a few stories that need to shift to make that happen.

**Honest curiosity, not sleazy small talk.** Business development is not a cheesy, disingenuous process of passing out business cards or relentless cold calling. Yes, we have all met people like that, but the truth is, the people who are best at bringing in business are those who are comfortable being themselves and genuinely curious about everyone they meet. It's hard to make meaningful, lasting connections when you're trying to be someone that you're not. Instead, relax. Let go of the overly canned elevator speech and consider every conversation your opportunity to learn more about potential clients and their goals and challenges.

**Building relationships, not making a sale.** Business development is about listening, not selling. This distinction allows you to better learn who your clients are, what keeps them up at night, and how you can meet their needs in a way that is better than your competitors. What is the psychology of your client? What do they need and want? What are they thinking? You answer these questions by continually reaching out, asking good questions, providing value, and actively building relationships. In the client's mind, you're not just a subject-matter expert, but one they have a relationship with who has taken time to understand their business. And that minimizes the perceived risks involved with hiring your firm.

**Long-haul strategy, not instant results.** A strong business development strategy does not mean coming home with a new job every time you attend a networking event. It means setting clear objectives, identifying target clients, and staying the course. Credibility and reputation are built over time. Making a few calls this week isn't likely to bring in a new client next week. The true return on your investment may take months, even years, depending on your strategy and goals. The best business developers understand it will take time and multiple interactions, and are prepared for the long haul.

**Persistence, not trying it once or twice.** The long-game strategy of business development requires putting your ego aside and learning not to take perceived rejection personally. It's not unusual to be blown off after your first or second phone or email outreach, and often, that has nothing to do with you. Expect to follow up many times, and to vary your methods. (This is where you can out-persevere and finesse your competitors.) You can choose to believe your negative stories: "I never should have called. You see, I'm terrible at this business development thing. They obviously don't want our services. I am bugging them." Or, you can try another perspective: "She's busy, so I'll make it easy and give her another call. We're not top of mind right now, so I'll send a reminder. This article will help them, so I'll quickly send that over."

**Valuable asset, not salesperson.** One thing that makes cultivation easier is your solid belief in your firm's value. When you believe that prospective clients are genuinely making a mistake by not hiring your firm, you become a more confident relationship-builder. Need help? Review your current and past projects to clearly identify where your firm has saved time or money, reduced liability, and/or made

the client look good. When satisfied clients have given rave reviews, what was most important to them? Your enthusiasm and confidence about the results you can provide can be contagious.

**Questions, not answers.** You do not need to show up with all the answers. In fact, it's better that you don't. Ask probing questions that get into the heart and head of your client. Listen to their answers so that you understand their challenges and what drives them. Excellent business developers understand that exceptional client service can start before they are your client. Just get to know this person in front of you (or on the other end of the phone) and their firm. What do they need? And when the time is right, don't forget to ask for the business. If you don't ask, you won't get!

**Connection, not deal-making.** We have, in this industry, what I call "the myth of the male golfer." This is the principal who heads out to the golf course, plays a few rounds, and lands this year's big project. While these people do exist, most business doesn't happen that way. Not everyone is a golfer or a deal-maker. For example, I prefer to eat, drink, coach, mentor, and volunteer—and that's how I choose to connect with colleagues and clients. The key is for you to find out how you like to connect with people. It's all about personal preference, as long as you are connecting.

**Strategy and action, not arm-waving sales targets.** I often see firms setting arbitrary sales goals without a larger strategy. They might target a percentage increase over the previous year. This can discourage many seller-doers because they don't know how to meet those targets. If you want to build a business development culture, it's more effective to develop outreach goals and break them down into clear actions. Consider targets such as joining two client-facing organizations, volunteering on two committees, attending six events and connecting with two new people per event, or checking in with three past clients each quarter. This is especially important for helping establish business development habits with emerging leaders and young professionals who don't yet have the experience or perspective.

**Structured for success, not winging it.** When you're being pulled in all directions or having an off day, it's typical to revert to the comfort zone of doing billable work and meeting deadlines. To build momentum with outreach and cultivation strategies, put them on your calendar. You can also use scripts and templates to simplify, save time, and help when you lack energy. Create a library of simple elevator pitches for specific services, templates for checking in with past clients, or scripts to use on calls. This can also be a great way for introverts to prepare, practice, and gain confidence with outreach.

**Consistent outreach, not client complacency.** Many firms get complacent, comfortable, and even cocky with clients when all seems to be going well. But you need to have business development strategy and practices in place for all of your clients. Take nothing for granted. In all honesty, I have made this mistake myself and have lost more than one project because of it. I didn't ask my typical probing questions about important selection criteria, expectations, and who else they may be considering before sending a proposal. And I didn't actively follow up to see if they had any questions. If I had, I could have addressed the clients' concerns and better contrasted my solution with others they were considering.

You don't need to be born with the skills and mindsets required for successful business development. These are things you can learn, practice, and refine to be authentic. And they have value that extends far beyond bringing work into the firm. Whether in recruiting and hiring, problem-solving on a project, managing a team, or strengthening your non-work relationships, you'll see a positive return, personally and professionally.

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