

HOW TO BUILD A BETTER PRACTICE

POSITIVE BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT ADVICE
FOR LAWYERS &
BUSINESS ADVISERS.



IS BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MORE DIFFICULT FOR WOMEN LAWYERS? (AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT...)

By Sue-Ella Prodonovich





THE BEST PRACTICES HAVE SOME THINGS IN COMMON...

For professional services firms there's no one path to success. Every journey is different, every practice is too. But all successful firms – whether they're Law Firm or Business Advisers – share some of the same characteristics.

They have clearly defined goals, as well as the right plans and right people to make them happen. They have the self-awareness to know where their competitive advantage lies and the self-confidence they need to capitalise on it. They know which market they're playing in and why clients choose them over others. And they invest in the resources and capabilities they need to stay ahead of the game.

I've formed this view in over 30 years of working closely with professional services firms. My first role was with Arthur Andersen in 1993 and, even though that firm is no longer with us, I still regard my time there as the best possible grounding in professional services business development. Since then I've worked in many capacities including as business development director at a global law firm, as coach with a global training organisation, and as the owner of a successful consulting business.

Today, I help firms sharpen their business development practices. I work with firms that focus on positive client relationships, and with individuals who want personal, intelligent support.

I do this through projects such as training young professionals, advising on client engagement programs, coaching Partners or facilitating planning retreats.

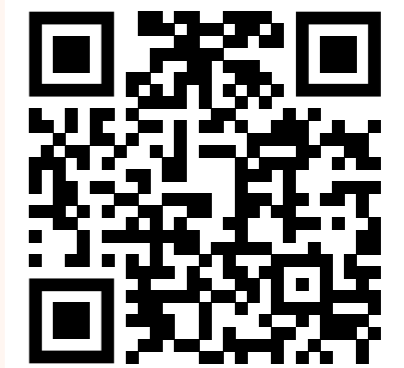
I also keep my own training up by attending conferences and further education programmes, listening to smart people, reading as much as I can and – as you'll see in this publication – putting my thoughts down on paper.

If you enjoy what you read, you'll find more of my observations and insights at www.prodonovich.com.au

Happy reading!

Sue-Ella

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Sue-Ella and Prodonovich Advisory acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first inhabitants of the nation and the traditional custodians of the land where we live, work and play.

Sue-Ella's office in Sydney is on country belonging to the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation in an area that was known as Tallawoladah and which is now called 'The Rocks.' Her home office is also on Gadigal land in an area that was known as Yaranabe.



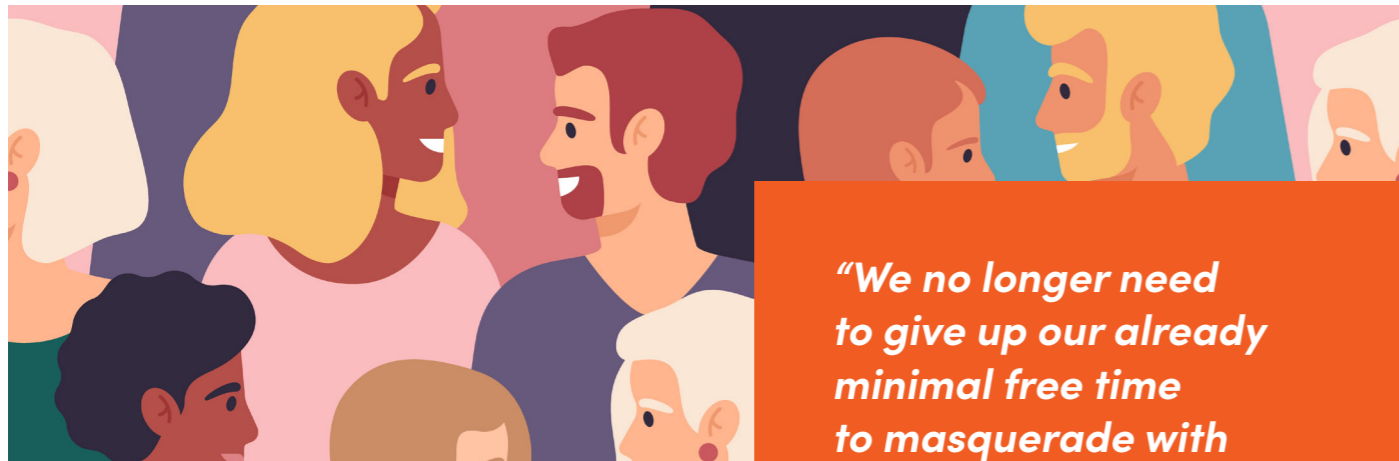
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“We no longer need to give up our already minimal free time to masquerade with business development activities we really don’t enjoy. Clients usually no longer expect us to either.”

IS BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MORE DIFFICULT FOR WOMEN?

AUGUST, 2023

At a recent conference, a female lawyer asked me how they could do BD. The problem, she explained, was that at her firm, all the emphasis was on networking, and, as a young mother with a heavy workload, she found it impossible to attend the after-hours events.

Then another young female lawyer piped up. She could go to networking events, she explained. She just didn’t like them. That’s because she was usually surrounded by a sea of older men in dark suits – a situation she found somewhat intimidating. She also found she had little in common with these guys outside of her work.

But it cuts both ways. That same week, a male veteran firm strategist and professional services industry ‘hall of famer’ said he no longer even attended the annual industry conference. He said the room full of younger, mainly female, professionals made him feel like the ‘creepy old guy’.

THE RAINMAKER ERA

Leave people together for any length of time (and, in a lot of professional services firms, people spend a lot of time together), and you’ll end up creating a certain culture. People will begin interacting in a certain way – usually with the subordinates imitating their bosses’ behaviour, dress sense and even language.

I’m a big fan of Michael Lewis’s book, *Liar’s Poker*, where one of the characters realises the key to getting ahead isn’t to have the best skills or knowledge but to imitate the boss.

This same ‘sameness’ has traditionally spilled over into BD for many firms.

The business development playbook became all about slick-talking, elevator pitches, and, often, let’s face it, hard-drinking. In other words, it was very Alpha male. The professionals were like this; the clients were like this too. And anyone who didn’t fit the template (often women, introverts, family people and non-drinkers) found it difficult.

THE TIMES THEY HAVE A CHANGED...

Even as far back as the 90s, the cracks were appearing for professional services firms.

In her 1999 study, Herminia Ibarra looked at how young professionals adapted to roles by experimenting with ‘provisional selves’ where they trialled their ultimate professional identities.

More than two decades later, academic expert and author Prof Laura Empson, observed that, with the help of Covid, the “concept of the professional ideal has expanded to incorporate people other than white heterosexual middle-class males”. However, she noted that “powerful norms persist about the correct way for professionals to look, speak and dress” (and do Business Development).

How do we identify when we’re working from home, surrounded by reminders of our domestic selves? Do our connections with our employers become less important when we don’t have the status signifiers or harbour view offices and partners’ lunches? When we’re meeting clients virtually from our lounge rooms or kitchens rather than in our firms’ meeting rooms, does it strengthen our personal ties and diminish the organisational ones?

And, most importantly, what does this all mean for how we attract and retain clients?

THE NEW NORMAL (FOR MOST FIRMS)

Despite the changing nature of the firm and our relationship with it, the fundamentals of business development still apply: build solid relationships, understand your niche and what makes your market tick; profile your technical or industry expertise so others

know what you do; build your reputation in a broader market or ecosystem; and build a track record for doing good work.

How you choose to do this in today’s landscape is personal. We’re all different. Some of us can’t wait to get out of the office and chew the fat over a glass of Pinot or lemonade with clients and peers.

The good thing is that most of us have moved on. We no longer need to give up our already minimal free time to masquerade with business development activities we really don’t enjoy. Clients usually no longer expect us to either.

Many clients now admit they’d prefer a scheduled call rather than a coffee catch-up or a time-boxed meeting rather than a dinner invitation – so they can get home to family or friends for tea.

It’s just that some firms haven’t yet received that memo.

So, if yours is one of them, it’s time to go rogue. But don’t worry – you won’t be alone.

I’m about to guide you through how to do it...

1. Understand What Business Development Is All About

Business development for professional service providers is about building up – then shoring up – three fundamental assets you contribute to the firm, namely:

- (1) The client relationships you influence
- (2) The technical expertise you bring, and
- (3) The reputation you have in a market (your ‘pulling’ power).

When you know that all you’re trying to do is to move one or more of these three needles, BD becomes a whole lot easier.

That said, each asset will be more or less important depending on what area you're working in, and what stage of your career you're at. For example, if you're a senior lawyer in M&A then (3) might be most critical. So, you should have an eye on cultivating strategic networks, connected contacts, and maintaining a regular flow of deep industry insights that keep conversations moving.

If you look after the private affairs of individuals, then (1) could be your focus – getting to know clients and their advisors and earning good word-of-mouth. And if you're in the early stages of your career, you'll probably be concentrating on building your chops – that is, acquiring the necessary technical skills in (2).

The first step is to work out what needle you're trying to move.

2. Look For BD Opportunities In Your Comfort Zone

Next, look for the easy wins when it comes to trying to move that needle.

We all have a tribe – or a group of people who share the same interests, ideals or values. Have a think about who those people are for you and how you connect with them.

This is where you'll feel most comfortable and often get the easiest BD done.

My experience is that the best networking can be done through informal common interest groups. There has been a real proliferation of supportive, niche professional groups on LinkedIn and Facebook (for example, Mums who are Criminal Lawyers).

These let us talk about things and reveal our personality and intelligence in a way that we may not in a more professional or formal setting.

3. Now Expand Your Comfort Zone

Our comfort zone is, well, comfortable. But staying entirely within it. It can also be a bit limiting if these are your only peeps. So now that we've established our comfort zone, it's time to expand it.

To create even more opportunities, your next task is to focus on your zone of 'proximal development' (or that space where you can do stuff with encouragement from, in collaboration with, capable peers).

Working in this zone – because feeling a little frustrated (or stimulated) is where we learn most and also where we really hit BD home runs.

For instance, put a laser-like focus on your market and the clients, experts and referral sources you enjoy. Think about how they came to your door in the first place – **can you replicate** or repeat it?

Can you nudge your comfort zone a little further? For example, if you've written an article on an emerging trend, could you consider working with a couple of other experts to research a more significant piece?

4. Create your own BD activity

Another approach is to be creative and come up with your own idea for something that's likely to help with (1), (2) and/or (3).

Who knows? You could even invent the very opportunity others in your market have been waiting for.

As Sarah Martin and Ali Levin from the Said Business School, Oxford University, observed: "We suggest women find ways to bring more of themselves to business development and that firms be generous with budgeting for non-traditional and innovative approaches." (2021)

For example, about a decade ago, a Firm in the New South Wales City of Parramatta noticed professional women's networking events were only held in Sydney CBD. So they started their own in Parramatta. This proved enormously successful, and they began attracting world-class speakers and sponsors.

Another cohort of women in the Canberra consulting sector started meeting for 'Red Wine and Blockchain' discussions.

Then there is the niche firm in Western Australia that encourages young professionals to work from co-working spaces inhabited by health tech start-ups. This approach to BD lets them be immersed in a completely different world, at least for a while.

Others get great BD done by tying it in with a personal passion. I enjoyed watching a number of professional teams get together over the past three months as they trained for Sydney's City to Surf Run. Meanwhile, Melbourne has the 'Midday Milers.'

5. Get Your Timing Right

For BD, timing is often everything. Business development is harder for many of us – especially women – at some times of the day, month or year.

It could be harder because you're buried in a complex matter your focus is laser-like on the job at hand. It could be harder because your confidence has taken a hit after a matter or a case or deal didn't go your way.

It could be harder when the kids are on school holidays or you're caring for parents.

That's why I often like to approach BD in the same way as an advertising campaign. Don't try to do an hour a day or a week. Go for bursts of action. Then give yourself time to recover and reflect.

6. Build Your Support Base (And Support Others)

Sometimes we encounter very specific problems in our BD ambitions. For women, these can often be tied to a perceived lack of experience, such as when a contact doesn't trust your smarts because you look too young (even though you have two decades under your belt). They can also be tied to cognitive biases, such as when someone doesn't trust commercial tenacity because you're quietly spoken or your sensitivity because you communicate directly.

If you're working on the edge of your comfort zone, you can overcome these.

That could be by hosting a joint event with one of your existing supporters, in which you show off your insights and intelligence. It could be by writing articles that challenge the status quo or share a view others haven't thought of. It could be by volunteering your time and services to an NFP or by holding a fundraising activity and asking your clients to join you.

It could even be by turning up to an event that you'd usually run a mile from, but taking a supporter with you.

Your supporter base is fundamental to your BD efforts, and when it comes to building it, the sky is the limit.



Scan here for this article with references, tools and further reading.



“Women continue to disproportionately carry the burden of family responsibilities, leaving them with less opportunity to engage in BD activities on top of core BAU work. Women disproportionately carry the responsibility for other non-promotable tasks such as recruitment, mentoring, office management, further reducing opportunities to focus on BD activities.”

IT'S OFFICIAL: PROFESSIONALS BELIEVE BD IS MORE DIFFICULT FOR WOMEN

NOVEMBER, 2023

Is business development in professional services more difficult for women? That's the question I posed in the previous article.

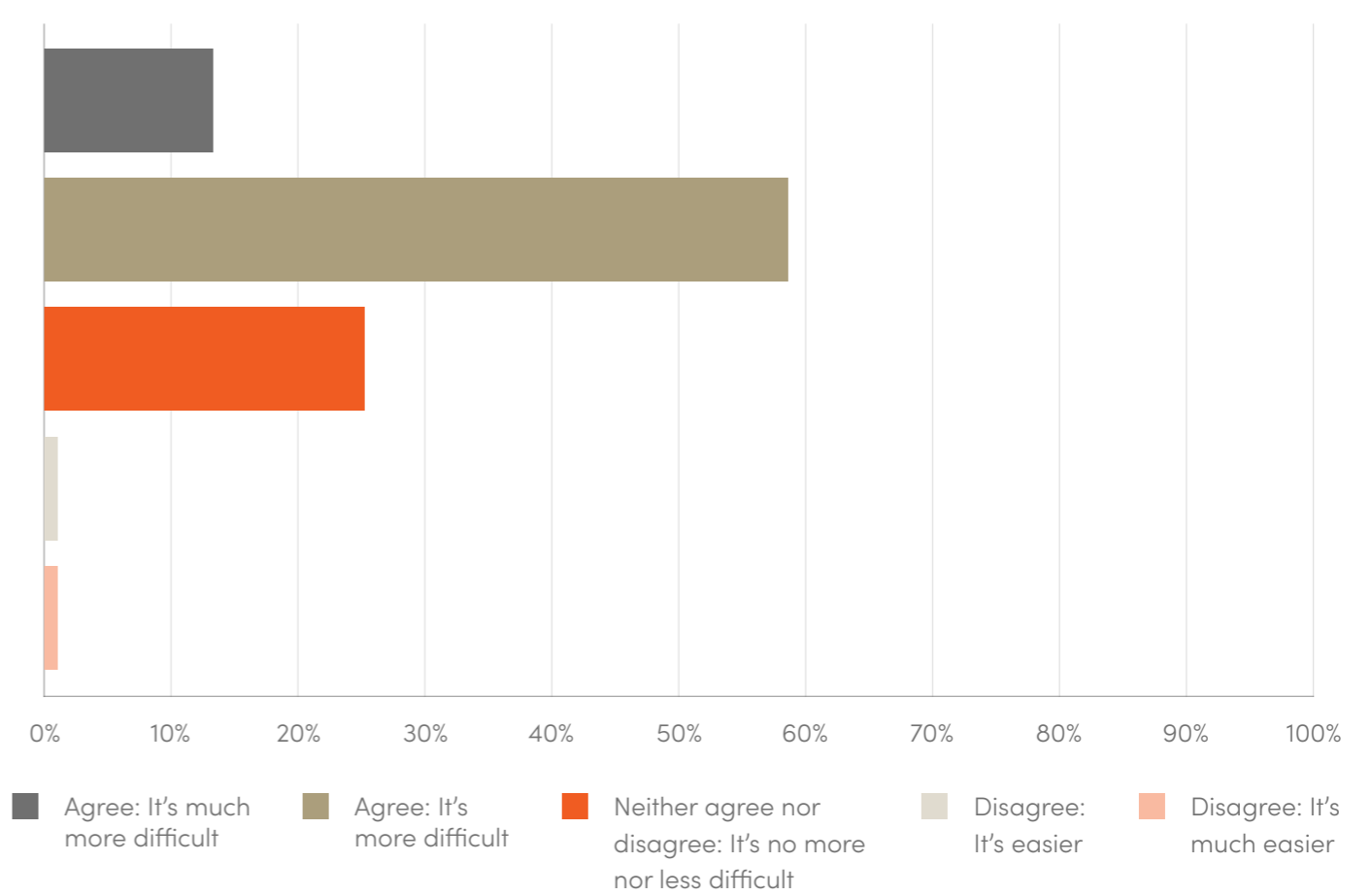
But to find out the real answer, I asked professionals to fill out a few short survey questions. I was delighted that so many - almost 100 of you - took the opportunity to respond.

Now, the results are in, and they reveal some interesting insights. Here's what you said.

MOST OF US AGREE: WOMEN FIND BD MORE DIFFICULT

There's little doubt most of us believe BD is more difficult for women. In fact, more than 72% of respondents said that business development was more difficult for women than men. Of these, just over 13% said it was much more difficult.

A quarter of respondents said it was equally difficult for men and women. Meanwhile, less than 3% said it was easier for women than men.



STILL SHOULDERING MOST OF THE WORKLOAD

One of the common themes from the comments supporting this question was that traditional BD (i.e. networking) favoured men, who often found it easier to engage in 'traditional' activities such as attending sporting events or having an after-work drink.

Some noted that this was often because professional women were still expected to carry a disproportionate load when it came to caring for children and carrying out household duties, making it difficult to engage in after-work social activities.

"Women continue to disproportionately carry the burden of family responsibilities, leaving them with less opportunity to engage in BD activities on top of core BAU work. Women disproportionately carry the responsibility for other non-promotable tasks such as recruitment, mentoring, office management, further reducing opportunities to focus on BD activities."

"BD is often done before or after work events, as a general rule, women are the default parent and carry the mental load of the household. This means attending BD before or after hours requires significant organising and is not always possible."

OUTMODED VIEWS ON GENDER RELATIONS REMAIN AN ISSUE

To many of us, it may seem incredible that highly successful professional women should be treated any differently from men. However, one of the most prevalent themes in your responses was the observation that outdated notions of gender relations still existed in the professions. This often impacted women's abilities to perform effective BD.

"BD is more difficult for women as approaching men and being alone with men can be misinterpreted as attraction rather than work-related. This can be an issue for the woman, the lead/client, and the woman's partner/spouse. It can also lead to misunderstanding and reputational issues."

"I have been questioned by firm partners if I take a male client to dinner/lunch, one-on-one. Most of my clients are men. This means if I have a client visiting from interstate, I feel the need to also invite another male partner from the firm so people don't get the wrong impression (despite being married with children)."

"As a younger woman, when I initiated BD activities, it was misinterpreted more than once as a personal invitation, not a professional invitation. I learned to only do BD with another professional, not alone..."

"There's still a strange dynamic asking to get in front of a senior male client(s), whether for a coffee or a drink, particularly as a younger female partner with a largely female team. There is still a perception in disputes that a female lawyer isn't going to be aggressive enough (even if the client doesn't want an aggressive strategy). How many times have I heard that we need to engage senior counsel (older male) for some 'gravitas'?"

DO WOMEN STILL FEEL LIKE IMPOSTERS?

Perhaps most interestingly, several respondents mentioned that, despite being successful and experienced professionals, they suffered from 'imposter syndrome'. In fact, the tendency for women to doubt themselves was another recurring theme.

Many respondents particularly felt that men were more likely to 'gild the lily' and overstate their capabilities and achievements, while women were more likely to understate them.

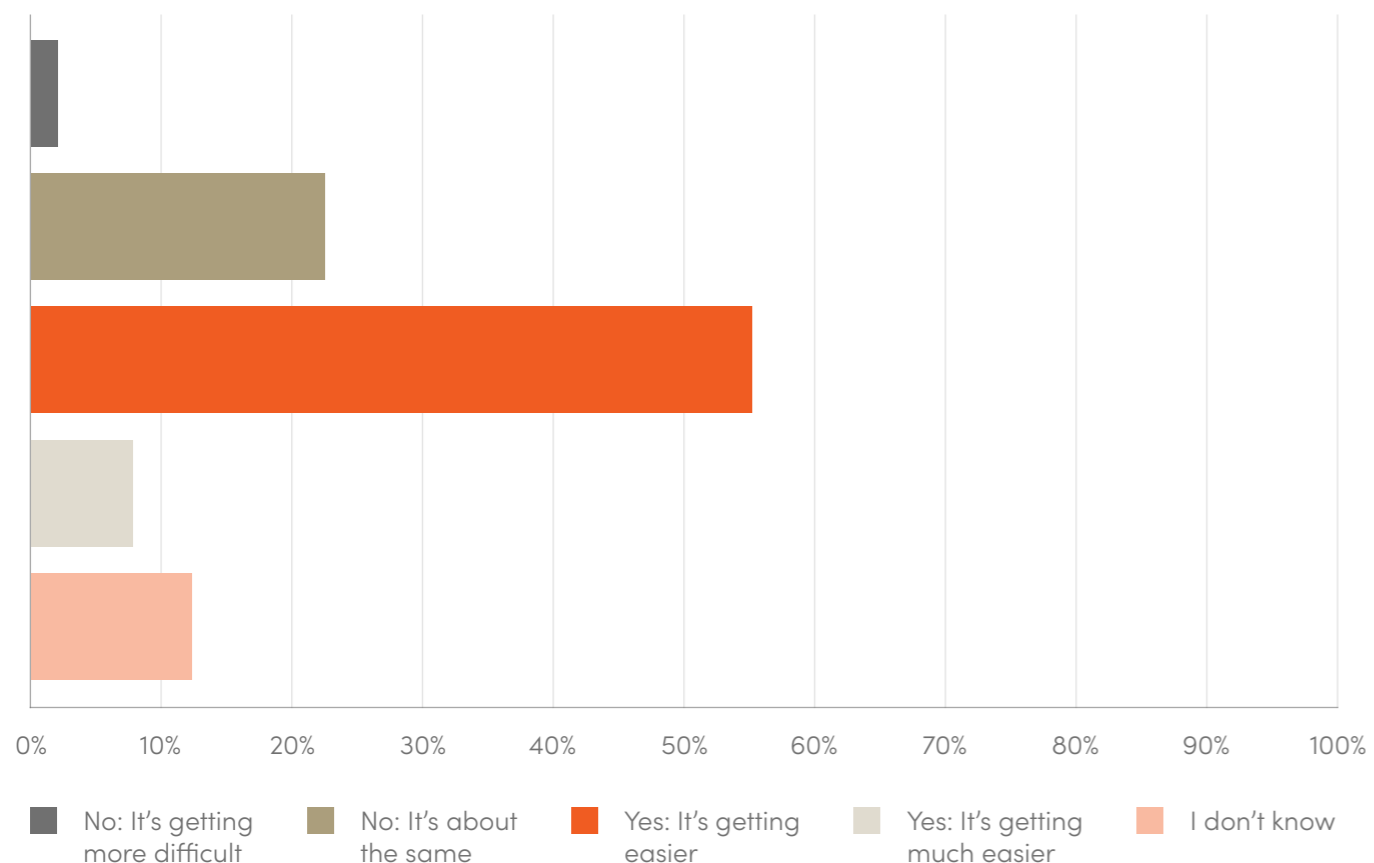
"Men seem to be able to talk up their practices and themselves without worrying about being 'found out'. I see male colleagues going into BD and relationship meetings far less prepared than I ever would, but they still seem to be held in high regard by clients. I spend a lot more time working on BD strategies, materials, preparation, and follow-up than my male colleagues, and this is hard to fit into a day when there are already so many other demands on my time..."

"At meetings or events, there can definitely be a sense of imposter syndrome; more often than not, there are more men in the room than women. It can be intimidating to break into a conversation with a group of lads discussing the latest sports news."

"I think women generally are less confident, and so 'talking up' their business skills and abilities doesn't come as naturally - as an overthinker, I err on the side of saying less, which I believe has been perceived as me not being as knowledgeable as more vocal counterparts."

BUT BD IS GETTING EASIER FOR WOMEN...

There was, however, some good news in the survey. Most respondents (63.3%) agreed that, over the past five years, it had become easier for women to engage in BD. Another 22.2% said it was about the same, and just 2.2% said it was getting harder. 12.2% said they weren't sure.



A lot of people believed this was the direct result of women taking on leadership roles as General Counsel and in the C-suites of corporate land.

"I have noticed an increase in women in general counsel and legal counsel roles (many who are mums), and being a mum myself, we find other ways to catch up and build the relationship during school hours."

"If you believe in the stereotypes, then it might also be easier to find 'common ground' with someone of the same gender. So it's a function of having more women on the client side that makes it easier for women on the 'BD' side (if you are assuming that there are gender differences)."

"More women clients, more serious support for women's professional development, more awareness of what is 'not on' in terms of blokey bad behaviour."

"In part, this is due to Covid having dampened clients' desire to attend out-of-hours functions, and so more BD occurs during business hours (lunchtime seminars, etc). But I also think it's because there are more women in more senior roles, and so the opportunity to undertake BD activities in a genuine, meaningful way that resonates with other women is more and more a feature."

ARE FIRMS LAGGING THE BUSINESS WORLD?

Unfortunately, however, some thought that the firms were not necessarily helping women build their practices in quite the same way. Many argued that law firms, especially, still lag behind.

"The only area where it is getting easier for women is the fact that so many General Counsel and in-house Counsel are women and that the clients want to support female partners. Not because of anything law firms are doing."

"A large part of the problem can be the firm, not the client. There are still firms that are managed by middle-aged white men who do not value a woman and her contribution."

DID COVID PLAY A PART IN HELPING WOMEN'S BD EFFORTS?

According to some respondents, though, it wasn't only women in leadership positions changing the landscape. Many suggested that any improvement in the ease of doing BD simply reflected the changes in how we work and socialise since COVID-19.

During the pandemic, so many of us worked from home permanently. Meetings became remote, BD moved from the 'hard' tasks of in-person networking and social functions to the 'softer' skills of online meetings, webinars and articles.

Some survey participants thought these activities levelled the playing field, although more than one believed they were still perceived as less critical.

"90% of my business development now involves information/value adds/exceptional service delivery rather than being based on long lunches/after-work dinners etc. Social events are more occasional, such as the end of year get together or end of matter lunch."

THE OPPOSING VIEW

It's worth noting, of course, that not everybody agreed BD was more difficult for women. Some people who argued this said BD was an individual, personality-based thing and that it was harder for introverts, regardless of whether they were male or female.

"Objectively, there is no difference. Personality-based individual business development has been replaced (in effective organisations) by planned and team-oriented business development. Women can, and do, play a key role."

"If you do want to stick to the stereotypes, then you also need to remember that diversity includes women who are 'more like' men and men who are 'more like' women. So, saying 'BD is easier for men' assumes that all men are the same or all men like football. In my experience, that is not a safe assumption!"

Others said that it depended on the field in which a professional specialised - and that while there were more male-dominated sectors (real estate, M&A, banking), there were also more female-dominated sectors too (although these often tended to be less well-paid).

"It depends on the sector. Blokey sectors such as real estate and investment banking definitely harder, but less blokey areas with the rise of the female GC less of an issue and being female can be positive."

"I think it depends on the area. I'm in disability law, and this is a sector that is predominantly female, so I'm doing BD with other females. When I worked in [a different] more male-dominated area I was younger [and felt] more intimidated in networking functions, which weren't my thing like drinking events and yacht rides."

DOES IT GET EASIER WITH EXPERIENCE?

Finally, some respondents suggested that BD was more challenging for younger and less experienced professional women than it was for senior and more experienced practitioners.

"I choose networking opportunities that fit into my day and my interests e.g. lunch, coffee or early drinks. Still do occasional dinners and events. It is a choice I make daily where I want to be. I decided to create my own tribe of like-minded people."

Some also said that, given the chance, women actually tended to be far better at BD than their male counterparts.

"Women tend to join the dots more and are better at referring work."

Finally, more than one respondent noted that while they appreciated the growing number of women's support groups and women-based networking opportunities, these were often self-defeating. That was because the senior males within their firm were not across them or not interested in their outcomes or recommendations.

"If I get encouraged to attend another women's event talking about flexible work or menopause at which there are no decision makers for the work I do, I'll go postal!"

IN SHORT...

The overwhelming majority of us believe professional women do find BD more challenging than men. However, most also believe it's getting better.

For a lot of respondents, whether or not it can truly be equal seems to depend on having more women in positions of authority, both in clients and within firms.

WHO TOOK THE SURVEY?

Of the respondents, 84.4% identified as female and 13.3% as male. 2.3% said they'd prefer not to disclose.

Meanwhile, 39.4% said they had more than 21 years' experience; 48.1% said they had between 10 and 20 years, and 12.7% had less than 10 years.

81% of fee-earners who identified the type of professional services firm they work with were lawyers working in private practice. The balance worked in non-fee earner roles with law firms or were fee earners with Business Consulting, Tax, Accounting and Advisory firms.

In terms of location of survey participants, 64% were from practices in Australia, 16% in New Zealand, 10% in Europe and the balance were in the US, the Middle East, South-East Asia and Latin America.

Definitions

Professional Services Firms (PSF) were defined as practices in the sectors of legal services, management consulting, accountancy, engineering services, financial advisory services, and architectural & surveying services.

Business Development was defined as the activity of generating new business opportunities with commercial clients. New business opportunities are derived from pursuing new client relationships, expanding roles with existing client relationships, or developing new services or products.

Commercial clients include public and private organisations, institutions, and government / statutory entities.



Scan here for this article with references, tools and further reading.



Buying decisions are made by people with diverse backgrounds, diverse interests and diverse points of view. And those people tend to be better informed, better educated about your services and more likely to be turned off, not on, by the rainmaker's efforts to enchant them.

WHY THE RAINMAKER IS DEAD: THE NEW RULES FOR WINNING WORK

MARCH, 2019

The rainmaker belongs in the 1980s, not today's professional services market. We explain why and how to win work without him.

Professional services firms have long been obsessed with the idea of the rainmaker. This senior partner (almost invariably a white male) supposedly uses his fat book of contacts and force of personality to wine, dine and charm potential clients and bring in all the work the practice can handle.

A lot of the business development advice you'll read is still built around this model, even today. It tells you that the best path to business success is to find the most extraverted person in your firm and then give them the script, the time and the space they need to work their magic.

What I'm here to tell you is that, while the rainmaker model worked well in the 1980s, it has no place in 2019.

The business world - and, more importantly, the clients - have moved on. Buying decisions are made by people with diverse backgrounds, diverse interests and diverse points of view. And those people tend to be better informed, better educated about your services and more likely to be turned off, not on, by the rainmaker's efforts to enchant them.

With that in mind, I thought I'd list what I think are the new rules of winning work in the professional services industry.

1. SELLING IS, LIKE, SO LAST CENTURY

The days of sweet talking someone into buying your services are over. The balance of power has shifted. Clients almost always now go into any transaction with their eyes wide open. They know who you are, how you're different from your competitors and even what you're usually good at and where you struggle.

They have a pretty good understanding of value and what your services should cost.

Before someone will buy from you, they need to be able to trust you, to know that you'll do a good job and - most importantly - to know that you're interested in them. The vital skill in this scenario is not salesmanship but client curiosity and empathy. You need to be able to prove that you want to understand the issues they face.

So take the time to listen to your clients and hear what they have to say and how they feel. Read about their industry and their stakeholders so you know what the challenges are. Better still, write articles or give talks about it yourself.

Demonstrating your expertise now counts a lot more than telling people how good you are.

2. EXTRAVERTS NO LONGER RULE THE ROOST

In the 'no selling' era of sales, the big talkers aren't the ones who shine. A whole body of research shows that now is the time for the ambivert.

The ambivert has both the characteristics of the extravert and of the introvert. That means they can listen intently but also talk when they need to. This combination makes them great at building authentic, long-term

relationships: the kind of ones that yield fruit for many years to come.

If you want to know how to bring out your own inner ambivert, I suggest reading the work of Dan Pink. (In fact, I suggest you read it regardless of your thoughts on ambiversion).

I've also written about the phenomenon in my article, "[Why your best seller may not be who you think it is](#)".

3. MASTER AND SERVANT IS A DEPECHE MODE SONG, NOT A MODEL FOR CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

For a long time, some professionals engaged in a master and servant relationship with their clients where they held the knowledge and, therefore, the power.

Once engaging the professional's services, the client did what they were told and at the end of it, they paid the bills. That was the era when the rainmaker shone. Because he held all the cards, he could manipulate information and only reveal what was in his interest.

As I said before, that's no longer the case. After the Global Financial Crisis, that all started to change. Clients began taking work back in-house. They started cutting costs. They started looking for better ways. And they expected to get a lot more for any money they spent.

In this new environment, some professional services firms stuck their tail between their legs and became the servants themselves. They reduced their fees whenever asked. They took way too much and stopped sticking their neck out over things they really should have. And they provided a level of service that made them - and especially their employees - miserable.

My advice for any firm who's flipped 180 degrees like this is to take a long hard look at what it's doing to your bottom line. Clients don't want a master – or a rainmaker – but they do, ultimately, want an equal.

If you're not prepared to be one, you can't expect to get the good work. If you go too far towards being the master, you'll be lucky to get anything. If you go too far towards being the servant, you'll just be given whatever work they know they'll be able to squeeze you on.

4. THE ELEVATOR PITCH NEEDS TO BE DROPPED DOWN THE LIFT SHAFT

Another approach I've seen many professionals try when it comes to sales is the elevator pitch. They're told that they need to be able to tell interested parties what they do, how they're different, and why people should use their services in the space of 30 seconds, or before that lift reaches the 25th floor.

In the worst cases, I've witnessed dignified professionals reduced to filling out templates to help them formulate that same pitch. (These templates come complete with business cliches like 'secret sauce', 'competitive advantage', and 'unique selling proposition'). Then they're told to memorise this guff and to parrot it whenever anyone asks them anything about what they do.

I've never been a good enough actor to recite a mediocre and unoriginal script enthusiastically and convincingly and I suspect most professionals aren't either. So ditch the elevator pitch and start speaking like a normal person again. Responding authentically (there's that word again) to the clues and cues clients give you are much more important to building a healthy, long-term and profitable client relationship than any 30-second rehearsed spiel will ever be.

5. IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION GETS YOU NOWHERE

Most professionals became professionals because they did well academically. And, unless you're some kind of genius, doing well academically means having a working understanding of the concept of delayed gratification. You're living proof that the best things in life come through hard work, perseverance and taking a long-term view, not from expecting instant success.

It's the same with BD. Building a solid professional/client relationship takes time. It requires staying in contact, doing the small things consistently and routinely and waiting patiently for the results to come through.

That's why I'm always sceptical of the sales coach who tells you to always go into any client-related interaction thinking 'what do I want to get out of it'? A better approach is to see any interaction as the chance to get to know someone better, listen to what their challenges are and to see how you may be able to help them. Think about what your relationship would look like if there is no brief.

That could be through something as simple as sending them a relevant article, putting them in touch with someone you know or even just lending a sympathetic ear.

6. INCLUDING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN INFLUENCING

The worst mistake you can make in the business landscape of today is to take the old 'us v them' approach where the client is someone to be treated at arm's length, especially in your business decisions. Instead, you should be collaborating with them and using their knowledge and opinion to inform your decision-making and help your business grow.

For instance, if you're putting someone up for Partner why not call the client and ask what they think of the idea? It's in their interest to give you honest feedback.

If you've been asked to respond to a request for proposal, why not call the client and ask them about it? Listen to what they say and even have an idea or two up your sleeve about some alternatives they might try. After all, I've never met any buyer who said they wouldn't like a better idea.

And if your client has a procurement expert then get to know them and what makes them tick.

In short, try to be collaborative and bring the client in on your decision making as early as you can so that your practice aligns with their business.

Just make sure you do it as an equal and not as their master or servant.

AND FINALLY...

In today's business world, the rainmaker is as relevant as big hair, shoulder pads, power suits and too much eye makeup. Let's leave him back in the 1980s where he belongs.



Scan here for this article with references, tools and further reading.





7 QUALITIES YOU NEED IN A POST RAINMAKER WORLD

MAY, 2019

For professionals, the rules of business development (BD) are being rewritten before our very eyes. After all, the market for professional services has become more transparent and more competitive and the balance of power has well and truly shifted to the buyer.

“Bringing in the wrong work can destroy your business. And the wrong work can be anything from work that saps your profit margin, is outside your expertise (and will bring down your reputation), or that you – and your team – simply don’t enjoy.”

As I wrote in the previous article, in this landscape, it’s no longer usually possible for a rainmaker to sweet talk his way into work for his firm over a good meal and a few glasses of wine. Instead, business development has become more nuanced, more transparent, and in many ways more difficult.

So, with that in mind, here are seven things I think any professional needs to succeed in BD today.

1. YOU NEED TO BE COMPETENT

We’re sometimes told that the era of the technician is over. But really, I think in many ways, it’s only just begun.

I say this because the quality of your work is probably now more important than it ever has been.

That’s because, whereas once clients were often poor judges of who was good and who was not, that’s not the case anymore. They now go into a relationship with their professionals with their eyes wide open. By the time they engage you they’ll probably already have a pretty good idea of what you can bring to the table.

It’s also because there’ll be more opportunities for human competence to shine as [Artificial Stupidity](#) steps into your data science party.

So, for today’s lawyers, accountants, engineers, consultants and other service professionals, the challenge has become more one of how do you demonstrate your competence to clients?

Well, hopefully, you’ll get more of an idea of that in the rest of this piece.

2. YOU NEED TO BE COLLABORATIVE

More than ever, no professional is an island. Gone are the days when it was ‘us’ and ‘them’. Now, clients expect you to work with them to solve problems, not to stand aloof and to hand down your advice from on high.

At the same, you can use the new balance of power in the professional/client relationship to your advantage by tapping into their opinions and knowledge and helping these inform your business practices.

This spirit of collaboration should also extend to the other professionals in your firm. While I’m [no fan of cross-selling](#) where it’s not in the client’s interest, working with your colleagues across the firm to solve a client’s problems can give you a powerful advantage over your rivals and ultimately lead to more work.

3. YOU NEED TO BE CURIOUS

Curiosity is probably the single most underrated characteristic both in BD specifically and in business more generally.

Curious people take in more, notice things others don’t and are generally more innovative in everything they do. And, more than anything, curious people ask questions.

So I always say, if you want to know how you can better help a client, why not just ask them. If you want to know what they think of your firm, what you’re doing and well and how you could improve, ask them that too. And if you want to know how you could change to help them reach their goals, get them to tell you that also.

If you want to get better at BD, I also think your curiosity should extend to reading about it too. And, if you want to know where to start, try these [6 ways to kickstart your business development engine](#).

4. YOU NEED A GOOD DOSE OF HUMILITY

There was a time when professionals could afford to be a little haughty and self-important. In fact, it was almost expected. These days, I think if there’s one trait almost certainly guaranteed to lose you work it’s arrogance – especially if that arrogance is misplaced (which in my experience it usually is).

More than that, I think humility extends to being generous with your time, helping out where you can and genuinely taking an interest in the careers, business and lives of others - even, or perhaps especially, when there's nothing in it for you.

Believe it or not, clients notice these things. They tend to know who's a good egg and who's just in it for themselves. And, if you fall into the second category, it will almost always count against you when it comes to growing a business.

5. YOU NEED TO START SAYING NO

In business development, there can be a temptation to think bringing in work is always a good thing. After all, in the days of the rainmaker, it was always other people who did the work, not the person who brought it in.

But actually, bringing in the wrong work can destroy your business. And the wrong work can be anything from work that saps your profit margin, is outside your expertise (and will bring down your reputation), or that you - and your team - simply don't enjoy.

To be successful, you have to start being able to politely decline the work that doesn't work for you and refer it to people who actually want to do it and will do it well.

In the words of Marie Kondo, focus only on the kind of work and the kind of clients that spark joy.

6. YOU NEED TO GET OUT FROM BEHIND YOUR DESK

I know I kicked off this article by saying it was cool to be competent once again, but you can't expect to keep getting the best work by being a techy alone. You need to get

out from behind the desk and meet people too. You also need to be able to demonstrate your ability on a broad scale.

So speak, publish and show people you know what you're talking about. Sign up to an in-person CPD session - better still take someone with you. Volunteer to host CPD sessions for your local professional association or other professional bodies. After all, fellow professionals are almost always the best referrers of work.

7. YOU NEED A PLAN

Yep, you need to plan.

Now I could say something here about "failing to plan is planning to fail" but because you've heard that many times before I won't. Instead, I'll give you some practical advice...

Every three months, you should be setting aside some formal time to review where you want to be, how you're going to get there, and where you're getting stuck.

During that time you should also be reviewing the state of your market.

Because really, one of the most important ingredients of all when it comes to BD success is consistency. Without it, you'll just be locked into the kind of boom-and-bust business model that leaves everyone anxious and unhappy.



Scan here for this article with references, tools and further reading.

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ARTICLE REFERENCES

These articles first appeared on my website with links to references and further reading. You can access the complete list of references, tools and related reading for each article at these links.

It's Official: Professionals Believe BD is More Difficult for Women (2023)

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The Key To Successful Practice? Stop Focussing on Winning Work.

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7 Business Development Qualities You Need in a Post-Rainmaker World (2020)

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"In my experience, Sue-Ella is the best Business Development Adviser in Australasia."

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"I've said for a long time now that Sue-Ella Prodonovich writes brilliant marketing tips for us non-marketer professional services people - this one though is pure genius! I can tell you it works. And I've been saying to anyone who will listen for years now that the day of the rainmaker is over...."

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"Whenever I read your articles, I am struck by how sound and pertinent they are. All too often what you say is really only stating the obvious, but for members of the legal profession it needs to be said, and often. If I were 100 years younger, and building up my practice, I would regard your missives as my Bible, to be read every night before I go to sleep!"

PARTNER

You have blown all of our expectations out of the water. I can say that comfortably because I have literally just had 10 different conversations with the attendees to ask for feedback, and all of it is so overwhelmingly positive."

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"Thanks for the Business Origination training. I found it super useful and had some 'Oh Shit' realisations. It's given me renewed energy to focus on a few core areas."

DIRECTOR, BIG 4 CONSULTING FIRM

Thank you Paul Evans, Toro Digital, and Ralph Grayden, Antelope Media, for helping me put this publication together. And thank you Rog x.