The Win Without Pitching Newsletter | October 2005

"If I get a meeting with someone I can almost always close them. I just need more meetings."

I hear this often. Years ago, between the end of my agency career and the launch of my consulting practice, I heard these words from an agency president who was hiring me to do contract business development work. He wanted to compensate me based on the number of meetings I could get him. A few months into the engagement we agreed to realign the incentives, for he had paid me well and had closed nothing. Through that experience we both learned three valuable lessons about meetings: they're easy to get, they can be expensive, and they are not a valid predictor of future business development success.

The Meeting, Part One

In this issue of the *Win Without Pitching Newsletter* I explore why more meetings doesn't mean more clients, the real role of the meeting in the business development cycle, and how to obtain the meeting once you determine that it is indeed the appropriate next step. Next month, in the second part of this two-part topic, I will address how to structure and navigate those meetings that are worth having.

An Epidemic of Meetings

On the hierarchy of inefficient agency selling practices, right below the Pitch and the Written Proposal, lies the Meeting. But unlike the first two tar pits of profit, meetings are often necessary, and they are not inherently bad. They're not inherently good, either. What they are, is common.

The business development approach practiced by most agencies and advocated by their advisors is: *get a meeting, get a project, win the account*. As the firm grows and dilutes its point of difference the approach changes to: *get a meeting, get invited to the pitch, win the account*. Both approaches start with getting a meeting. No meeting equals no account, therefore more meetings should predict more accounts, right? *Wrong*. Deep down inside most of us know this is false logic because we've proven it to be false, haven't we? (I was fortunate to have proven it on someone else's nickel.) But for lack of a better approach we keep chasing meetings, hoping to overcome what we suspect to be a flawed process with the brute force of volume.

Why We Meet

Someone once said that a business development expert is someone who knows what to say after hello. The rest ask for a meeting. Properly set up and executed, face-to-face meetings are vehicles for dialogue in which *both* parties make an assessment of one's ability to help the other. Not knowing what to say after hello throughout most of my agency career, I asked for meetings. In those meetings I befriended, presented, shared my thinking on the client-to-be's problem, and produced long documents with his logo on it, hoping that I would get hired. The proper questions went unasked, first on the phone then again in the meeting. I substituted many long meetings for what should have been short phone calls.

When you know what to say after hello, you will say it *on the phone*. You will do your due diligence, and *be seen* doing so, and only then, after both parties have determined that yes, perhaps you can help, will you broach the subject of meeting, and only if it appears to make sense to both parties.

What Your Meeting Request Says About You

Imagine that a doctor calls you, looking for your business, and suggests early in the call that you meet. “I know you’re busy, but I'm going to be in the area and I think it would be great if we could get together for an hour or so.”

“Get together? Why?”

“Well, I think I might be able to help you… I could buy you lunch?”

“*Lunch?* Help me, how?”

“You know, with your, uh, medical problems...”

“Look, I don't have any medical problems, and you're right - I *am* busy…”

“Well… I've been watching and I've noticed some things... diet, complexion…”

“*What?* You're *telling* me I have a problem!? You're calling me completely unsolicited and not asking, but *telling* me I have a problem and that you want to buy me lunch so you can promote your services to me? Services that I didn't ask for?”

“Well… it'll be a fancy restaurant – we can take my fancy car – and, uh… maybe I can share some of my ideas about your health. I've got *great* ideas.”

The doctor's approach says far too much about him. He is assuming need where you see none and he is asking for your most valuable possession – time - offering to pay for it with a ride in a Porsche and a meal. This is a man who wants to get you alone so he can talk you into something. If you do decide to meet with him then the meal had better be good, the ideas abundant, and the Porsche a convertible. But does agreeing to this exchange bring you any closer to hiring him?

Mission: Position

Your mission – your higher purpose – at each and every interaction with your client-to-be is to position. To position the firm in the client-to-be's mind as a leading expert in your chosen field. If your client-to-be recognizes and values your expertise then you have all kinds of ability to impact the buying process and command a price premium. If he does not, then at best you're pitching against other undifferentiated firms, but more likely the field includes a firm that is seen to possess the expertise that yours lacks.

Our doctor might get his meeting, but what price has he paid? If he is hired will he be offering high-priced guidance or will he be lancing boils, defending invoices, and forever trying to reposition himself in your eyes while you hire experts to do the lucrative work?

If you remain true to your mission and don't allow that mission to be subjugated by more immediate desires (e.g.: a meeting) then over time outcomes will take care of themselves. It's not worth sacrificing your integrity by requesting something that appears to serve your interest above the client's.

After Hello

While your mission is to position, your stated objective in almost every interaction is *to determine if there is a fit between the client-to-be's need and your expertise suitable enough to merit taking another step together*. State this objective in your telephone introduction and proceed to it by asking well-crafted questions about the client-to-be's need; questions that demonstrate your selectivity and your understanding of his challenges. It is through your questions, not your statements, that you will convey expertise.

It is rare that you should ask for a meeting. If the client-to-be does come to see a fit then he may request one. If he does not and you determine that a meeting is an appropriate next step then tie your language around that meeting back into your objective: "It looks to me like there might be a fit here. Do you think it makes sense to get together and explore this a little further?" If the answer is no, don't try to talk him into it, but do double back to find out if the client-to-be shares your perception of the fit and then try to determine a more suitable next step. If you do get the meeting you will have set it up as a meeting of peers at worst, and of patient and practitioner at best.

Remain guided by your mission (to position) and focused on your objective (to determine a fit) and remember that to ask for a meeting prematurely is to sacrifice your position as an expert in the mind of the client-to-be. Such meetings are auditions, and stars (experts) never audition.

Next month, in The Meeting, Part Two, I'll address how to navigate those meetings that are worth having.