

Agency business development is a cocktail of sales, marketing and public relations activities. To be successful, your firm has to possess assets in each area. (I define assets here as skills, abilities and motivation.) While the business development assets of individuals and firms vary, and therefore their approaches to business development vary, there are a couple of assets your firm cannot get by without. One is the sales asset of competitive drive - the ability to overcome call reluctance and pick up the phone, even when you'd rather not.

The second required asset, the one I want to address here, is a public relations one - the ability to write. I've grappled with this issue for years now and I'm convinced there's no way around it. If you want to be seen as an expert at what you do, you must write about it. Let me give you four reasons why, and then issue you a challenge.

## Four Reasons to Write

At the very top of the ladder of lead generation are the PR and publicity-based activities of speaking and writing. These are expertise-validating activities that you undertake today in order to drive inbound enquiries tomorrow. Over time you should be climbing the ladder of lead generation, moving up through sales-based activities, through marketing-based ones up to the top where most of what you do to drive new leads is speak and write.

For years I've heard the retort from agency principals that, 'I'm not a good writer' or 'I'm not comfortable doing public speaking.' (I'll tackle the subject of public speaking in a future issue of the Win Without Pitching Newsletter.) And for years I've let my clients off the hook on this issue, recognizing that some people do find public speaking difficult, and some are not the best writers. But over time I've come to see that one of the defining characteristics of the expert firm is that experts write. For the four reasons below, there's just no way around it.

### **1. Validate your Expertise**

The last decade or so has seen a plethora of ill-conceived business books. But even bad books drive good business for their authors. The world recognizes the published author as the expert and the written word as a higher source than the spoken word.

Not all writing is created equal however and not all publishing platforms are of equal value either. Writing is at the top of the ladder of lead generation because it serves to validate your expertise. The greatest validation is when an esteemed publisher agrees to publish your work. But validation can also come through having a large subscriber base, broad geographic distribution, or an ability to engage people as demonstrated through a volume of comments or feedback.

Your writing becomes the reference point for discussions on the subject, and you become the expert – *even if people disagree with you*. In fact, your ability to generate dialogue around your ideas is a pretty good indicator of your expertise quotient.

Someone once said to me that most of the value created in the new economy is through writing. I'm not sure that I entirely believe this but I believe the sentiment that in a knowledge-based business the outcomes of writing are product and value.

## 2. Deepen Your Expertise

Writing about what you do *forces* you to get better at it.

I have [ten tests of your positioning](#), the last of which is *Are you getting smarter quickly?* My experience is that those who write about their area of expertise do get smarter quickly, while those who do not write stagnate.

A caveat, however: not all writing forces learning. You must go narrow and deep into your subject matter. You'll find that flitting about the surface of broad issues like branding or social media gets old quickly and doesn't make you smarter. By narrowing the focus of your writing you will force yourself into the depth of your subject matter to the point where you will have to organize your thinking and have no choice but to think through some issues that you haven't previously. In this manner you think through your fingers.

In my own consulting practice, writing is one of the most painful and rewarding things that I do. I often claim that I bleed into my keyboard, but when I'm done I am a lot smarter than when I began. Blogs are good places to plant seeds and begin conversations, but deepening your expertise usually requires diving in further than a daily blog post allows. Feel free to plant your ideas in your posts then go back and tend to the ones that have germinated. This usually requires another forum like a newsletter, published article, thought paper or book chapter.

## 3. Test Your Positioning

When I'm working onsite with a firm I keep a running list of the smart things they say that support their claim of expertise. I then present it back to them as an editorial list of topics they should be writing about. The list of a narrowly-focused expert firm might run to 20 or even 30 items over the course of a day. A poorly-positioned firm's list will be less than 10.

Generalists simply cover too much well-traveled ground to be able to generate a lot of deep insight. A good test of your positioning is to make your own editorial list. What can you write about that will prove, and therefore deepen, your expertise in your area of focus?

Generalists have a hard time getting past big topics like branding, where they struggle to add anything new and meaningful to a subject that has been beat to death by thousands of firms over many years. If you cannot write some narrow and deep articles on your area of expertise, it may be that your area of focus is too broad to be meaningful. For this reason, generalists tend to resist writing while specialists embrace it. Your reaction to my suggestion that you need to write will tell you a lot about your own confidence in the positioning of your firm.

#### **4. Get Found**

My long-standing guidance on agency websites has been 'Shut up and show the work.' While I still advocate this approach (the primary job of your website is to inspire) I also recognize that the searchability of the web has driven the need for content strategies.

Most of your writings on your area of expertise should live somewhere out there on the web, if not right on your own website, helping to drive highly targeted traffic to you. Don't waste too much time covering the broad topics, but crawl into the cracks and write deeply on narrow subjects within your expertise. The more specialized your writing, the better the quality of the visitor to your site. You'll lose some traffic volume by narrowing your focus but the quality of the traffic you do get will make the sacrifice an easy one.

There are lots of ways to generate leads, but the dynamics of the buy-sell relationship are entirely different when the client-to-be already sees you as the expert (after reading your writing or hearing you speak) and seeks you out. Unlike an outbound telephone introduction where you begin the conversation with zero power and quickly seek to find some, conversations that begin from these types of inbound enquiries see you start from a position of power. You can use that power to impact how your services are bought, how much you charge, and the amount of control you'll have going into the engagement. Expert firms begin most conversations from this position of strength.

#### **But, I'm Not a Good Writer – Now What!?**

My response to this question has evolved over the years. I used to suggest a ghostwriter or aggregating other people's content as alternatives to writing, recognizing that some people find writing difficult. Now I see the choice simply as write or fail. It's hard to succeed in a business or career in the knowledge economy without writing.

The good news is that, unlike public speaking, which can require the conquering of a long-standing, deep-rooted fear, writing is really an issue of discipline, having something to write about, practice and more practice. It's fine to enlist others to help, like editors and collaborators, but he who generates the content is king.

#### **A Challenge**

Here's my challenge to you: Take a few minutes to calculate how many hours you spent writing proposals last year. Now take those misguided hours and reallocate at least half of them to writing about your area of expertise this year. Feel free to start with your blog as a place to plant seeds. Turn those seeds that germinate into newsletters. Submit your better newsletters to industry publications that your clients read. Then think about stringing your better newsletters together into a book for publication.

Once you publish the definitive book on your area of expertise you will have reached the very top of the ladder of lead generation and business development will change for you forever. The time to start writing is right now.