



Releasing the potential of people in business

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## **PEOPLE BUY PEOPLE' BUT WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR 'PEOPLE TO BUY LAWYERS?**

**By Tom Bird, Director, RTPLegal**

In today's economy it is more important than ever for lawyers to make a great first impression with prospective clients and focus on deepening the relationships that they have with existing clients. We are often asked to provide 'Fee Negotiation' and 'Commercial Management of Client Relationships' programmes and, whilst tools and techniques in these areas can make a real difference to fee income and profitability, they both require good levels of rapport to exist between lawyer and client. Rapport then is at the core of a lot of the work that lawyers engage in and it is central to their ability to influence effectively.

Often this rapport occurs naturally but the relationship between client and lawyer is different to some. Lawyers are highly trained technical experts. In their conversations with other lawyers it is easy for them to slip into 'digital language': language that is based on the terms and words used within the law. This enables lawyers to communicate with each other quickly and easily but it may not be the case when the lawyer needs to engage with a prospect.

Rapport can turn a telephone call into a meeting. It can make the difference between having a 'prospect' and creating a client. It can help develop a relationship that creates barriers to competitive entry. At a more tactical level it can help you use a follow-up letter or e-mail to deepen the connection with your client.

The question then is: how do you as a lawyer establish a connection of rapport with a prospect who may not be a technical expert?

Building rapport is the subject of many books and training courses but I had an experience a while back that proves the value of a single, powerful question used correctly. The point of this story is that a lawyer can utilize the same approach in a variety of contexts easily to build or deepen rapport.

### **The Story**

We had a call one day from the managing director of a medical healthcare manufacturer. He was looking for some development work for his top team and had found our details over the internet. He was going to speak to four suppliers and give each of them the brief. He would review proposals from each and then meet with two and choose one to design and deliver the work. He had no relationship in place with any of the suppliers.



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My colleague Jeremy took the call and, before listening to the brief, asked the killer question: "What's important to you about any work that is delivered to your top team?" After a few seconds of silence, the prospect said one word: "Rigour". It turned out that all of the team had strong academic backgrounds and so any work delivered needed to be grounded in academic research and rigour. As the medical field was more in my area of focus Jeremy handed over the brief to me to write the proposal. I used the word 'rigour' twice in the proposal. We got through to the next stage where I met with the prospect. At this stage I had only had one brief conversation with him. He had our proposal in front of him and I could see that he had highlighted the word 'rigour'. When we won the deal I asked what had made the difference and this is honestly what the client said to me: "You simply seem to speak the same language as us".

Can you see the parallels with the legal market? Your client or a prospect calls regarding a new piece of work or as a result of a cross-selling conversation from another partner in the firm they have been working with. You need to show them quickly that you are listening to them and understand what is important to them. The initial sense of being listened to and understood is critical if a client or prospect is going to give you a valuable and important piece of work. To some extent, they would take the technical expertise of the lawyers for granted. It could, therefore, be 'the difference that makes the difference'.

### **The Lessons**

1. Asking the right question of a prospective client early in the conversation is a real opportunity to differentiate and build rapport. You need to get them to talk and asking a great question sets you up from the beginning as taking a consultative, value-add approach.
2. Asking "What's important to you about ...?" gets the other person's values around whatever it is you are talking about. In my example, it was the equivalent of asking him how he would make his choice of who to buy from! When you understand someone's values around how they will make a decision you can leverage this in any follow-up communication. This literally makes sure that you are focusing on the right things for that specific client or prospect. Many other law firms won't be doing this. It will give you an edge. In the legal context you could ask: "What's important to you about your choice of law firm?" or "What's important to you about how we would work together?".
3. If you do ask the "What's important to you?" question, make sure that you note down their response in their words and do not 'translate' them into words that mean something to you. Words have importance. In my example, the word was 'rigour' and not 'rigid', 'precise', 'academic', 'meticulous' or any other possible alternative.



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4. When you send a follow-up letter or e-mail use the words that they have used to you. This helps to build rapport before you even meet them!

Now, I would like to think that we won the project for reasons other than just that we asked this one question and built rapport more effectively than the other three suppliers but I am sure that it helped. It's so easy and shows a genuine interest in the other person. Early on in a prospect contact we need to really be on the top of our game. We have to make the best first impression and do what we can to 'stack the cards' in favour of getting the business. The "What's important to you?" question helps you do this.

- Try asking the 'values' question yourself and let us know what happens.
- What other tips do you have for building rapport quickly with a prospect?

We look forward to your comments and examples! If you would like to find out more about our range of tailored negotiation and fee negotiation courses please email [info@rtplegal](mailto:info@rtplegal), or call us on 01903 813897.