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Fighting Talk

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By **Jack Downton**

Lost touch with a lucrative client? Hate making those hard-sell phone calls? Fear not – former Royal Marine turned business development guru Jack Downton is here to help

Blackberrys, iPads, iPhones, and Twitter: in many ways it's never been easier to keep in contact with clients. Very often, however, solicitors lose touch with clients and find it tough to 'get back in' when they want to kick-start a former working relationship. It is often said that acquiring brand new customers costs up to six times more than selling to existing or former clients. So how do you get that relationship back on track?

Many solicitors dread stepping into the shoes of a salesman, and making what is considered a 'sales call'. To overcome your aversion, you need a purpose for the call, whether it is to inform your contact about any developments in the firm or discuss previous work: in short, have a plan to give you the confidence to pick up the phone.

Often, the trickiest part of the phone call happens before you've even spoken to your target. How do you navigate past the 'gatekeeper' – the secretaries or assistants who can block your call to that all important decision maker?

Breaking through. Secretaries are immensely useful if you get them on your side. It is part of their job, however, to filter calls so you need to ensure yours isn't one of those that get the heave-ho.

Although you may have worked with a particular firm in the past, perhaps your contact has moved on. If you don't know the name of the person you need to speak to, bear in mind that many companies have a 'no name' policy: if you don't know the person's name, your call will not get put through. That's where resources such as LinkedIn come into play. A bit of research as to names, job titles and contact numbers can pay big dividends later.

When speaking with the gatekeeper, being very polite could actually harm your chances of getting put through. While I wouldn't advise anyone to be rude, an opening line along the following lines is likely to get the chop: "Hello, it's Ima Loy-Ya calling from XYZ law firm and I was wondering if you'd be able to put me through to the MD. I haven't spoken to him in a while and I wanted to get in touch to say hello, and let him know what we're all up to and....Yes, I can leave a message."

Straight to the point. Instead, imagine you are Richard Branson. How would he approach the call? I think he'd be blunt and to the point: "Branson here. Rockerfeller in?" Avoid all normal telephone manners, and while not being impolite, avoid all conditional sentences along with 'should' and 'would'. Going for first names only can also help. "Could I speak with Ms Meaden" is less likely to be as successful as "Is Deborah in?"A tone that implies you know the person well and are not the sort to be put on hold is much more likely to ensure your call goes straight through and you are not left pressing the pound sign and recording your message.

Overcoming objections – "No thanks, we don't need your services" When you do get through, many solicitors give up at the first sign of objection from potential clients. It is preferable to avoid objections altogether and this will be more likely if you've done further research. And remember, just because you've worked with the client before, this doesn't mean you can rely on previous knowledge. Make sure you're up to date on their latest news; nothing shouts 'cold call' more than not knowing, for example, the company has recently merged.

The main reason for objections is that you haven't put yourself in the shoes of the person receiving the call. Ask yourself: "If I were to receive this call, what would make me listen?" Most callers fail to consider what the other party wants.

In confidence. When you call, exude confidence. If you're speaking to someone you've never worked with before, state with confidence your relationship with their predecessor, and say that given their positive comments about your work, you are getting back in touch to update the client on some issues of interest to them.

Fight the urge to disagree with or interrupt the client. Acknowledge their concern ("I understand the way you feel...") or follow up with an open question ("that's interesting, why do you think that?"). Be sure to prepare responses for common objections. For example, answer "decisions like this are made at a more senior level/in another office" with "who should I speak to there?"; respond to "we've just instructed someone else" with "let's meet briefly so should you ever need to look elsewhere you can see how we might help in the future" and try following the common 'hidden' objection of "just send me an email" with "what information in particular would be of most use to you?" to make sure you're not just being fobbed off.

Don't be disheartened if the 'objector' doesn't back down and don't take it personally. You know how their objection impacts on you but not what they intended. So don't make assumptions as to their motives because they will generally be negative and will chip away at your confidence to make more calls. Be prepared to revisit your plan, and remember perseverance will often pay off.