Asking the right questions in Business Development meetings

There are many very good ‘models’ of how to structure a business development discussion with a potential client. In our experience however, the conversation often deviates from the ideal structure and it is important for the professional to be flexible in their style and have the ability to react so that they maintain control. One of the key skills in guiding the discussion is the ability to ask the right question at the right time.

We have set out below typical phases of a business development discussion and some options on the questions you could ask at each phase. Each meeting will be different depending on the context, the relationship you already have, and the people involved, so use them as a basis for your thinking, not as a ‘must ask’ list.

Ask about the business and what’s happening for them

These questions give you the opportunity to get some context for your discussions and also demonstrate your interest in them. They have the added advantage of getting your contact talking, which helps with the flow of the meeting. The questions you ask will depend on the nature of what you are discussing, of course.

Some examples:

1. How’s business looking at the moment?
2. How do you see the market prospects over the coming months?
3. How are you gearing up to deal with the market?
4. How are your competitors responding to the market situation?
5. What business priorities are you focusing on just now?
6. What are your team’s priorities at the moment?
7. We’re seeing an increase in … [whatever], have you seen the same trend?
8. What are you and your team busy with just now?
9. How are you intending to tackle [think of a relevant issue or market driver]
10. What do you think about …[highlight a piece of relevant market news to discuss]

Explore the possibilities

These questions allow you to ‘test’ your contact’s reaction to you and what’s been said so far. They also help you to ‘qualify’ the opportunity so that you get a sense of the potential for work opportunities. Naturally, these questions need to be asked sensitively, and in the context of the previous discussion. Some examples follow overleaf:

1. In order to align ourselves with your thinking … what are you looking for from the firms who work with you?
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2. I’d be interested in your thoughts on ... how we might be able to work together (wait for the answer) ...

3. Can I ask you ... what criteria do you use for selecting firms to work with you?

4. I don’t want to waste your time, and I just wondered if that are any barriers in your mind to us working together in the future. 5. From what I’ve said ... do you think there are avenues for us to work together going forward?

5. I know that you have other firms in place for your referral work ... and I just wondered what we would need to do to be in a position to support you in a similar way.

6. Is there anything on your agenda that you could try us out with to see how we work with you and your team?

7. What’s your policy on allocation of work – do you have any specific criteria for choosing firms?

8. Is there anything in the pipeline that we could help you with at the moment?

9. How do you work with the firms you use? (Wait for the answer) ... is that something we could become involved with in some capacity also?

Link to their comments ... and gain your contact’s commitment where it is appropriate

In our experience, the great skill of effective new business generators in professional services is the ability to listen to what has been said by their contact and, appropriately, ask a suitable commitment question, or to propose a way forward. The aim is to focus all of the conversation into an action that the potential client could take if they wish to do so. The exact commitment question depends on the situation - we’ve given a range here for you to think about. Which would you be comfortable using?

Some examples:

1. Just on that point, we could consider how you can ...

2. If you are interested, perhaps we could ...

3. Is that something you would like us to do for you ...?

4. It might be worthwhile you meeting ...[colleague] on that point

5. Those would be my thoughts on the way forward, and if you are happy, I’d suggest ...

6. Would it make sense to ...?

7. So, what I would propose, if you agree, would be to ...

8. I think one of the things that is important from what we have talked about so far is ...

9. How would you like to move forward on that..?

10. Based on what we’ve just discussed, what are your thoughts on the next steps..?
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Or position yourself for the future

In many cases, a business development discussion doesn’t lend itself to gaining a contact’s commitment at that point – they have nothing specific, or immediate, that they would wish to take forward. In this case, good business generators ‘put down a marker’ which demonstrates their enthusiasm to work with the potential client and, at the same time, serves as a test of the contact’s reaction. If the response is lukewarm the professional knows that further work is required to make this a work generating relationship.

Some examples:

1. If the opportunity arises, we’d really like the chance to support you on that …
2. When the time is right, we’d be happy to …
3. When you are ready, I’d welcome the opportunity to …
4. When it is convenient for you, perhaps we can talk about how we may be able to help you with…