

Rainmaker Q&A: Godwin Bowman's Sidney Scheinberg

Law360, New York (November 23, 2016, 4:17 PM EST) --

Sidney H. Scheinberg is a shareholder with Godwin Bowman & Martinez, representing clients in complex and critical cases. Based in the firm's Dallas office, the primary focus of his practice is on bankruptcy and business litigation matters, with an emphasis on the representation of secured creditors, such as automobile finance companies and national banking associations.

His clients have included such luminaries as Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Hyundai, Honda, Nissan and GM Financial.

A former radio broadcaster and radio salesperson, he is a frequent speaker at National Association of Chapter Thirteen Trustees' meetings, and has taught a variety of continuing legal education courses on bankruptcy. His stint as "Sid Chase" on Memphis radio continues to be the subject of both speculation and adulation in the "Bluff City" many years after his departure from the broadcasting world for a legal career.



Sidney H.
Scheinberg

Q: What skill was most important for you in becoming a rainmaker?

A: I sold radio for several years, and found that the most effective things I could do to both help, and to ultimately sell, a prospect were to diagnose their actual needs, and develop a marketing plan that truly fulfilled those needs. As a lawyer, I've found that the same thing is just as effective. Clients don't hire you simply to hire a lawyer, they hire a lawyer to solve a problem ... to fulfill a need. For me, this means creating a marketing plan for selling my services to a client who has a need, finding a niche where I can help them, and then showing them how my services actually help.

Going to conferences, events and trade groups is a great start, but the next step — actually getting to know people — talking with them, taking them to lunch or dinner, spending time with them and actively listening to what they have to say is crucial. Once I feel that I understand their needs and what they're truly seeking, I've found that I can then effectively ask for their business. That's important too. If you've never cold-called to make sales, it's a very worthwhile experience. Every attorney should have the chance to do it, because it teaches the other skill that I would consider most important — perseverance — continuing to pursue business even in the face of hearing the word "no" repeated again and again. And that's not just a sales skill an attorney should have, it's an attitude that every attorney should bring to their client in the courtroom. Keep fighting, be persistent and don't accept failure.

Q: How do you prepare a pitch for a potential new client?

A: Again, it's important to listen to what the prospect says, and what you believe they need. Developing

a relationship with a client or prospect, and using the active listening skills that I mentioned earlier, are critical first steps in giving the prospect a pitch that addresses problems that they need solved. If we can solve their problem, this gives us the best chance to get a new client. Once I have that in place, I put together the right team for the prospective client, and determine what will be needed to be approved to do their work.

I've found that lunch-and-learn presentations, where the team and I are essentially giving away free samples of legal advice, are very effective in demonstrating expertise, along with showing the prospect exactly where we could help them further. These events tell the prospect that we know their industry, we know them and that we are willing to share some things that may affect them — even before they are sending us business. Nothing beats direct, personal contact.

Q: Share an example of a time when landing a client was especially difficult, and how you handled it.

A: I had been trying to court a nationally known automobile finance company for over eight years without success. Strangely enough, a neighbor that I didn't know, who worked for the firm, was talking to my wife, and somehow (I'm still not sure how) through their interaction, I ended up getting a meeting with the company's decision-maker, who hired me. That company became one of my best clients for nearly two decades. While I'm not suggesting that an aspiring rainmaker should simply wait for a happy coincidence, I think the moral of this story is that persistence can pay off.

Over those eight years of futility it would have been easy to simply give up. But if I had given up, I wouldn't have been ready to take advantage of the opportunity to get one of my best clients ever when that opportunity finally arose. You don't know when or how something like that might happen; the prospect may become unhappy with who they're using, personnel may change or you (or your friend, spouse or child) may have a chance encounter with someone involved with the prospect's business. Is there sometimes luck involved? Sure. But if you've been persistently networking, and following up, with a prospect for years, kept at it and built a solid reputation, you have a much better chance to take advantage of that lucky break.

Q: What should aspiring rainmakers focus on when beginning their law careers?

A: Doing the basics is almost always a great way to start. Don't just hang out at your local bar association. Get out in the community and meet people. Unless you have a niche practice such as elder law or appellate, those other lawyers aren't going to be much help to you. Instead, get involved in a business trade group that is in your niche. Contact people regularly. You're not chasing ambulances; you're helping a business solve a problem that they may not know they have. But beyond the basics, there are two things that I'd strongly recommend.

First, take some time and determine exactly where your personal competitive advantage lies. Unless you're in a very small, one-lawyer town, there is always competition. If you're a solo practitioner, use the resources that your situation brings. Approach a prospect with the idea that they will have the attention of the firm's principal, and that you can do it more economically than the big guys. If you have a firm behind you, sell the history, experience and expertise of everyone in the firm. Use the fact that you're part of that to build your personal credibility too, but don't go it alone, actually use those firm resources. Second, figure out what you can for the prospect. It's great that you're an attorney, but how does it help them? Determine what their problems might be, show how you can help solve those problems, and you're more than halfway to making the sale.

Q: What's the most challenging aspect of remaining a rainmaker?

A: Taking the time to market while servicing current clients. When I was selling radio, it was an accepted fact that half of this year's business wouldn't be with you next year. Advertisers would have moved on to other media, cut back or stopped their advertising, gone out of business, or otherwise left you. As a lawyer, how many of you keep the same business year after year? Whether you are selling radio or legal services, you always have to be looking for business. And the best time to look for new business is when things are going well. There is a natural energy that you get when you're successful — success breeds success — and prospects are looking for that success in a lawyer as well.

I also find that it's important to never talk over the head of a client or prospect. When you've been in the legal field for a while, it's easy to do what my friend, Ed, calls "Speaking Lawyer," which is using legal jargon, citing cases that are obscure to the layman, or using other language that, instead of clearly communicating to your client, creates confusion, resentment and conceivably anger. None of these are good for generating new business or keeping current business. Keep your marketing focus — even when business is good — and make the effort to communicate with your clients on their own level.

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