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# THE SHARPER LAWYER

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## *Essential Qualities of Successful Rainmakers*

Cynthia Sharp, Esquire - The Sharper Lawyer

## ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL RAINMAKERS

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By Cynthia Sharp, The Sharper Lawyer

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Although a handful of law firms have hired nonlawyer sales teams, most still rely on individual attorneys or practice groups to generate new client matters (i.e., to sell), even though the majority of them have never received business development training.

My purpose in writing this article is to describe some of the important characteristics and habits shared by attorneys who have built successful practices. The perspectives are based on my 37 years of experience in the legal field—30 as the managing partner of my own small firm and seven as a business development leader.

Readers whose job responsibilities include formal or informal coaching of firm lawyers may wish to distribute this article to their protégés or to discuss some of the concepts during the course of future coaching conversations.

### **Mindset**

Some lawyers do not pursue business development activities and conversations because they do not think it is their role. Others are simply untrained, uncomfortable with the process, and don't know where to start. Also, sales can be perceived as a dirty word by professionals whose experience with high-pressure retail salesmen has been less than attractive.

Needless to say, high-pressure tactics have no place in the professional environment. The mindset of successful lawyers is to *influence* their clients to act in their best legal interest by retaining them to help prevent or solve their problems. Ascending to that position of influence requires an investment in developing a trusted relationship.

When legal stakes are high, relationships usually take longer to ripen, which is why building the client pipeline takes significant discipline. Because the results may not come quickly, the impatient attorney faced with a lengthy relationship-building process may give up out of frustration and lose the opportunity to “ask for business” when the time is right. Given the choice, the immediate gratification realized from working on legal matters that need attention now seems to make more sense.

### **Define, Find, and Research Prospects**

Because the sales process with a prospective client can be lengthy, a robust pipeline that is constantly replenished is necessary to ensure future financial health. Before taking the actions to fill the pipeline, the attorney must clearly define the characteristics of his or her ideal client. The exercise of determining who the attorney wants to serve can result in further refinement of his or her practice area.

Finding the prospects or referral sources (whether in person or online) requires a consistent investment of time. Not only must a written strategy be devised, but the attorney must remain constantly active in adhering to the process and remaining accountable.

Preparation and follow-up are key elements when networking and when meeting one-on-one.

Attorneys must understand the industry, trends, and common experiences of desired clients. A checklist of sample issues to explore with prospective business clients can be obtained by emailing me at [cindy@thesharperlawyer.com](mailto:cindy@thesharperlawyer.com). Lawyers with a depth of industry-specific knowledge attract more clients and are more strongly positioned to serve them.

Gathering personal information about the individuals with whom you want to deal will also prove invaluable. Last year, I received an email inquiry from a prospective client who had found me

online through a Google search. Before returning the call, I thoroughly reviewed her LinkedIn profile as well as other resources. During our conversation, I commented that I grew up close to her college town. We soon found that we had much more in common and chatted for a few minutes before getting down to business. She retained me before the end of the phone call which may not have happened so quickly without my prior research.

### **Awareness of Personal and Professional Image**

Attorneys who project confidence and professional gravitas are more likely to be retained than a lawyer with a weak image. The most powerful way for a lawyer to develop confidence is to excel at his or her craft and deliver fabulous client service.

That being said, it is difficult to know how we come across to others unless we receive the gift of feedback. For example, I am acquainted with a prominent attorney who uses the phrase “you know” to the point of distraction. Verbal “tics” detract from an otherwise powerful message.

Likewise, poor physical appearance sends a negative, if subliminal, nonverbal signal to potential clients as well as referral sources. Grooming habits and professional style can be difficult topics to broach; however, a number of lawyers I have met would benefit from such a conversation.

### **Skilled at Asking Probing Questions**

Questions asked throughout the relationship should be designed to engage the client’s thought processes and lead toward a formal relationship.

My favorite go-to question when meeting new prospects is “What is the biggest challenge that you are facing in your industry/business?” Answers to this simple open-ended question are educational and position us to understand the client’s needs so that we can demonstrate that we are the right attorney to prevent or solve their problems.

## **Respectful Listener**

All too often, people are guilty of “self-listening,” which means that they are focusing on their own clever thoughts and constructing their next sentence instead of giving full attention to their conversation partner.

Space limitations prevent me from elaborating on this critical topic. Check out [www.listen.org](http://www.listen.org) (the website of the International Listening Association) for significant resources and tools.

## **Empathy**

Developing sensitivity to distinctions in communication and personality types can help us in developing rapport and interacting on a deeper level. Reviewing the results of a DISC assessment that I took helped me greatly in understanding how to approach others who are different from me.

The following is an example of how a relationship can be quickly blown with careless words and conversation. Example: In the course of settling a major medical malpractice matter on behalf of a brain-injured child, the tort attorney recommended that the parents consult with a representative from a structured settlement company and with me in my capacity as a special needs attorney. During the meeting, the claims adjuster told the parents that establishing a special needs trust was a “no brainer.” Insulted at the person’s insensitivity, the mother of the child walked out of the room, and it took close to an hour for her to agree to resume the meeting.

## **Persistence and Resilience in the Face of Possible Rejection**

If the lawyer is not retained at the end of a consultation, the following wrap-up questions can be productive as a means of continuing the conversation: (1) What additional information do you need in order to make the decision as to whether to move forward? (2) How long will it take you

to make the decision? (3) Is it all right if I call you in X weeks to see where you stand in your decision making?

By all means, make sure that a system is implemented so that the attorney actually follows up.

Fear of rejection prevents many talented attorneys from pursuing lucrative opportunities. If we don't ask for business, we don't run the risk of hearing that ego deflating word: "No." People with resilient attitudes are able to bounce back quickly in the face of an adverse situation. Fortunately, resilience can be learned through experience along with a healthy dose of self-talk.

Example: When told that an attorney's services are not needed, the first thought should be: "The potential client doesn't mean 'No,' they just mean 'Not yet.'" Instead of feeling rejected, the attorney could feel curious as to why the client decided to go a different direction. Three years ago, I was invited to submit a proposal for a matter in the center of my wheelhouse. When someone else was hired, I emailed the GC and requested a conversation to discuss the reasons for my rejection. This led to a strong value conversation that led to a significant contract within a few months.

## **Conclusion**

Almost every motivated lawyer can build his or her book of business by shifting mindset, improving the qualities outlined above, and taking consistent steps to implement a strategic plan. Sometimes, they simply need guidance along the way.

## **[Cynthia Sharp](#)**

*Business development leader and veteran attorney Cynthia Sharp, Esq., works with motivated lawyers seeking to generate additional revenue for their law firms. The business development strategies and skill sets that she shares were developed and tested over a period of 30 years in practice and are constantly refined to reflect modern marketing techniques. For additional information about business development issues, check out [thesharperlady.com](http://thesharperlady.com).*