



6 SALES CULTURE KILLERS IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRMS

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When it comes to business development, some professional services firms are their own worst enemies. They create an environment in which winning new work happens in spite of their culture rather than because of it.

Here are the top 6 sales culture killers I notice. (An infographic is provided at the end of this article).

CULTURE KILLER 1: AVOIDING THE 'S' WORD

I'm sometimes asked by Firms to change the title of training or coaching sessions because "we don't use the word 'sales' around here". The simple fact is that some professionals find it difficult to accept the value of sales and sales training.

Sometimes they see it as a bit beneath them; other times, they associate it with insincere or 'one off' relationships. Interestingly, they seem more open to sales if it is couched in terms of 'rainmaking' or 'business development'.

Avoiding direct talk of sales stops firms from exploring the best practices for winning new business that have developed in sectors outside professional services. After all, there are many industries where sales is more sophisticated and rigorously analysed. There's a lot we can learn by studying them, both when it comes to methods of selling and what makes a good salesperson. Find out more about [why your best seller may not be who you think it is](#).

CULTURE KILLER 2: SILOED PRACTICES

One of the most common roadblocks to growth in professional services firms is a siloed approach to winning and developing clients. I should qualify this. I've seen some healthy silos where independent teams with deep specialisation have managed and grown their practices by operating in a 'freedom within boundaries' model. But they're the exception to the rule. And even then, they've found a way for the silos to work effectively together despite the competition.

Generally, it kills a sales culture when practices start pricing for new clients or remunerate employees in one part of the firm at the expense of the firm's overall position. Another common problem I see occurs when a firm's administrative functions - such as credit control, reception, executive assistants or other support staff - fail to adopt a firm's service standards, effectively undermining the good work of fee earners.

Good firms manage to instill a sense of common purpose across the entire practice from the managing partner to the mailroom.

CULTURE KILLER 3: OVER RELIANCE ON CROSS-SELLING

At a recent Legal Sales conference I attended, one person made the comment that asking professionals used to getting all their work referred to them to now embrace 'sales' is like asking a trust fund kid to get a job. But focusing your efforts on introducing colleagues and additional services into clients can bring additional risk into the relationship. As Tim Williams, author of the bestselling [Take a Stand for your Brand](#) notes: "there's really no such thing as full-service because client's don't hire you for everything – they hire you for something."

Don't get me wrong, cross-serving is great when it happens as a matter of course. For example, it's a no-brainer when a client needs help and the introduction is immediately relevant. But when you force introductions the lead times are usually longer than other ways of bringing work through the door.

You may be better off embracing an approach that lets your star performers get on with what they do best.

CULTURE KILLER 4: UNTRAINED LEADERS

In the modern professional services practice, firm leaders need to be great rainmakers who can compete and build a secure ongoing fee base in an ultra-competitive market. That means, the base qualifications for leadership roles must include sales competencies such as lead generation, innovative problem solving, business pitching and pricing.

If your firm isn't methodically training its leaders in these skills, it's time to start.

CULTURE KILLER 5: UNCLEAR GOALS AND METRICS

You'll find it hard to get anywhere unless you know where you want to go. But too often I see practices with vague sales goals, like "win more work" or "grow our practice by x".

Good firms establish specific goals, articulate why they're important, and then communicate them across the firm. More importantly, they continually measure how they're performing against these goals with solid metrics. Then they refine what they're doing or bring in the resources they need to make sure they get to where they want to be.

CULTURE KILLER 6: MINIMAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Building an effective sales culture means encouraging people to want to be accountable for the work they're bringing in or the 'assists' they've made. They also need to be prepared for times when demand drops, workflows dry up to adapt when they are not reaching their agreed sales targets.

While that accountability needs to start right from the top of the firm, there's no reason even the more junior fee earners shouldn't also be responsible for sales.

So there are my six main sales culture killers. Are there others you think I've left out?

WANT MORE?

If you'd like help with building the skills and smarts of your team email Sue-Ella or [book a time for her to call you.](#)



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Problem: Avoiding talk of sales.

Effect: Firms never explore better ways to win work.



Problem: Siloed practices.

Effect: Ignores the competitive advantage of deep client knowledge.



Problem: Over-reliance on cross-selling.

Effect: High risk tactic that can encourage complacency.



Problem: Untrained leaders.

Effect: Firm's best rainmakers never reach their potential.



Problem: Unclear goals and metrics.

Effect: Business never ends up achieving what it should.



Problem: Minimal accountability.

Effect: Culture of buck passing takes hold.