



THE RULES FOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT DURING COVID-19

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Last year I wrote that [the rainmaker was dead](#).

The business world, I pointed out, has moved on from the wining, dining senior partner who can sweet-talk any client into opening their wallet. That guy belongs with shoulder pads, big hair and Gordon Gekko in the 1980s. Today, buyers are more informed, better educated about your services and more likely to be turned off by smooth talkers than enchanted by them.

If you didn't believe me then, surely COVID-19 has convinced you that the world has moved on.

Here's why and what I think matters much more in a pandemic-affected world.

1. THE SCHMOOZIN' JUST AIN'T HAPPENIN'

Wining and dining have always been the main tool of the rainmaker. The big lunch, the social event, even the cup of coffee. Well, guess what? Each of these is off-limits right now.

We're working from home and if we can meet, it can't be in any more than groups of two. Even as restrictions get lifted, it's likely to stay this way for a while yet.

That whole social side of things that the rainmaker needs has gone for now. There's no way to work the room, no forum through which to build those crucial face-to-face relationships, no way to grease the wheel with small talk so you earn the right to get down to business.

Even the world's most charming person finds it pretty difficult to schmooze over a 30-minute group chat on Zoom.

2. COMPETENCE IS THE NEW BLACK

Because of this, I think competence matters more than ever. Clients will be judging you on the work you do, not on the peripherals.

They'll want to know that you have the technical expertise, that you're making good commercial calls, that you also understand their frame of mind, and you're making their lives easier.

They'll also want to know what you don't know and the limits on predicting results. So you may find it useful grouping thoughts using scenario frameworks like one of the four VUCA categories (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) or [Deloitte's COVID-19 Thrive Scenarios](#) or even dusting off [De bono's Six Thinking Hats](#).

That's what good value advice look likes. After all, these really are the only things they can assess you on.



They can't make a call on how hospitable you are or how much fun you are to be around.

3. IT'S ABOUT THE PERSON, NOT THE JOB TITLE

Even before the virus changed our worlds, I noticed clients were beginning to care a lot more about the person they worked with, regardless of their firm or the job title.

Some time ago I interviewed a General Counsel for feedback about why they were sending one of their panel firms so much work. They told me it had nothing to do with the partners or their pitches. It had everything to do with a senior associate (who they had never met in person) who was giving them service and advice of a quality no one else could match. This lawyer was so client-focused she'd even put every one of the client's leadership meetings in her diary. A day or so before they took place she'd send them an analysis of all the issues they needed to know about and how to respond. Talk about making your client look good!

In these days where competence matters more than anything, my view is that clients will be increasingly looking beyond someone's position within a firm to work with the person they want. Professionals who can add that kind of value are the ones who'll win out.

4. MEASURED IS BETTER

Consistent with everything I've been saying, I think that right now is the worst possible time to be selling. It's just not possible to think about your 2020 targets when many of your clients will be thinking about their 2021 survival plans.

In this environment, it's better to take a measured approach. Don't go out guns a blazing, hoping to win people over. This is a time for authenticity, a time to see how you can help rather than how much you can bill and a time to share stuff that actually helps your clients without expecting anything in return.

As PwC's [Leadership From the Kitchen Table](#) noted: *"During troubled times, it's tempting to pretend we have all the answers. Now is the time to be as honest as possible. Don't be afraid to say that you don't know. Ultimately, authenticity is making peace with doubt and ambiguity. When you show up as your whole self, the connections that you've built in your business become deeper. They 'safeguard' you from the need to be perfect, allow you to be vulnerable and recognised for doing your best (rather than being pulled up on your mistakes)."*

If you do it properly, you'll be staying top of people's minds anyway, so that when they are ready to buy you'll be the first they call.

If you need help on how to do that, read this article [here](#).

My experience from the 90's "[recession we had to have](#)" and our last big economic slump, the GFC, was that people pretty quickly worked out who the good eggs were - the ones genuinely interested in long-term relationships - and who was only in it for themselves.



A lot of this downturn should be about making sure you don't fall into the second category.

5. USE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO REBUILD

I hate the phrase “pivoting” almost as much I hate “the new normal”. But for most of us, this quieter time really is a good opportunity to have a think about how we want our businesses to look. I also think it's a great chance to see where your work is coming from and what you can do to grow your practice the way you want it to.

That's why taking the time to sit down and go through your client list over the past three years should be at the top of your 'To Do' list. Work out how much you billed those clients and, more importantly for our purposes - how they came to you. Was it through a referral? Through another part of your firm? Did they call out of the blue?

This information is vital for rebuilding your practice the way you want it to be when some kind of normalcy eventually returns. Use this time to develop a plan that guides your BD efforts now and into the future, so that you can locate and cultivate the kind of clients who will propel your practice forward.

AND FINALLY...

Remember this is a time of anxiety but it could also be a time of great opportunity too. By throwing out antiquated ideas of how to win work and instead focusing on doing what you do well and servicing the clients you want to serve, you have the chance to put yourself ahead of the pack when things pick up again. And, even though it may not feel like right now, one day they will.

FURTHER READING

Amy Plowman, Lynette Nixon and Angi Bissell (April 2020) [Leadership from the Kitchen table: More art less Science](#). PwC

Dr Edward M Hallowell (2005) [Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform](#), HBR

Nathan Bennett & G James Lemoine (2014) What A Difference A Word Makes: Understanding Threats to Performance in a VUCA World. May-June (Vol 53) Edition of [Business Horizons, Journal of the Kelley School of Business](#), Indiana University.



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