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SHRINE LONDON

Special Report

“The Partner Problem”

Nobody Taught Them
to Sell: Why Service
Firms Complain About
Their Leads While
Throwing Away the
Best of Them, and
What a Confident
Professional Does
Differently.

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The Best People in the Firm Were Never Taught to Win Work.

In every law firm, accountancy practice, architecture studio, engineering consultancy and advisory business, the same arrangement holds. The people who deliver the work are also expected to win it. They were recruited for their technical ability, promoted for it, and are still measured on it. At some point along the way they were handed a business development target, and nobody thought to mention that winning work is a discipline in its own right, with its own structure, its own habits and its own way of being learned.

The result is entirely predictable and almost universal. Partners and senior professionals rely on reputation and referral. Pipelines exist in people's heads rather than on paper. Cross-selling happens when two colleagues happen to be in the same lift. And the firm's commercial performance rises and falls with the personality of whoever is in front of the client that week.

This report is about the 2 places where that shows up most expensively, and they are rarely the 2 a managing partner would name. The first is the leads the firm believes are poor. The second is the objections the firm loses to once a conversation is under way. In our experience, across the clients we have advised and within our own practice, a professional who handles objections with confidence lifts sales on the pipeline they already have by around 16%, with no new leads, no new marketing and no new hires. That figure is where this report begins and where it ends.

The Leads Are Not the Problem. The Reading of Them Is.

Ask a room of partners about their lead flow and the answer is remarkably consistent. The leads are poor. They are unqualified, they are price shoppers, they are people who will never instruct, and the firm's time is better spent elsewhere. It is said with such certainty, and so often, that it has become a settled fact in most firms rather than an opinion.

It is, in our experience, almost always wrong. What a firm describes as scraps is more often prime steak that nobody has been trained to recognise. The enquiry that was dismissed as tyre-kicking was a business owner testing whether the firm would take them seriously. The referral that went quiet after one email was a genuine prospect who received a generic reply and drew the obvious conclusion. The contact who asked for a fee before explaining their situation was not shopping on price. They were asking the only question they knew how to ask, and were met with a number instead of a conversation.

None of this is a failure of the leads. It is a failure of reading them, and the reason it persists is simple. The people doing the reading are brilliant at their profession and have no framework for this one. They are judging a lead the way they would judge a piece of technical work, quickly and on its face, when what it needs is to be judged by someone who understands what it might become and the difference between what has arrived and what has engaged.

A Lead Is Not a Prospect Until It Has Engaged.

The single most useful distinction a professional can make is between a lead and a prospect, and most firms use the 2 words interchangeably. They are not the same thing. A lead is a name with a possible need attached. It may be warm, a referral or someone who has heard the firm speak, or it may be cold, a name on a list or an enquiry from nowhere. Either way it has done nothing yet, and it has no right to be judged, qualified or dismissed, since there is nothing to judge. A lead becomes a prospect at one moment only, when it engages: it replies, it takes the call, it answers a question or asks one back. Until then the only job is to create that moment, and most firms are binning leads for failing a test they have not yet been given the chance to sit.

Once across that line, a prospect is either warm or cold, and the 2 are handled differently rather than one being kept and the other discarded. A cold prospect has engaged but is not ready, and it goes into a nurture cycle that keeps it in view until the timing changes, at which point it warms. A warm prospect goes into its own cycle of questions and qualification, is quoted, is questioned and qualified a second time, is negotiated with, and is closed. There are more steps in practice and the detail varies by firm, but the shape is the same everywhere, and 3 features of it deserve attention.

The first is that nothing leaves the ladder. A prospect that is not ready is not lost. It is early, and it returns to nurture rather than to a column marked dead. The firms that win consistently are the ones that treat early as a category with its own pace rather than a polite word for gone.

The second is that qualification happens twice, not once. A prospect is qualified before a proposal is written and again after it, and the second qualification is the one most professionals skip. They have invested the time, they have written the document, and the sunk cost carries them to a close that was never going to happen.

The third is that the ladder does not end at the instruction. A new client enters an onboarding cycle of its own, and then a long-term one, and it is from there that the next matter, the introduction to a colleague and the referral to a new warm lead all come. The firm that only draws its pipeline as far as the close has left out the part that feeds it.

A firm that adopts even this basic shape changes overnight in one respect. It stops arguing about whether the leads are any good and starts asking where on the ladder its prospects are stalling. That is a question with an answer, and the answer is usually the same: at the first objection.

Objections Are Not Rejections. They Are the Client Thinking Aloud.

Professionals tend to experience an objection as a door closing. A client says the fee is high, or the timing is wrong, or they already have someone, and the professional hears the end of the conversation. They respond with grace, they leave the door open, and they move on. The prospect is quietly moved to the column marked lost, and the partner concludes that the lead was never serious.

An objection is nothing of the kind. It is the client thinking aloud, and it is the most valuable thing they will say in the whole exchange, since it tells the professional exactly what stands between the conversation and the instruction. A client who raises no objection is usually a client who has already decided against you and is being polite. A client who raises one is still in the room.

This is where the 16% lives. It is not that confident professionals win more of the difficult conversations. It is that they stay in the conversation at the moment less confident colleagues leave it, and a pipeline in which the professional stays in the room at the first objection converts at a materially higher rate than one in which they do not. No new leads are required. The same prospects, read properly and held at the moment of hesitation, produce the difference.

The 5 Objections Every Professional Hears, and What Each One Means.

There are not many objections. There are perhaps 5 that account for nearly all of them, and the reason professionals struggle is not that they are unusual but that nobody has ever explained what each one is actually saying. Read correctly, each is an instruction.

The fee is too high. This is almost never about the fee. It is a statement that the client cannot yet see what the fee buys, which means the value has not been made specific enough to their situation. A professional who responds by discounting has confirmed that the fee was arbitrary. One who responds by returning to the client's situation, and what it will cost them to leave it as it is, has answered the real question.

It is not the right time. This means the client has not been given a reason for now. Timing objections are a request for consequence: what happens if this waits 6 months, and what does that cost. A professional who accepts the timing has accepted a delay the client did not really want. One who explores it, without pressure, usually finds that the timing was a way of asking how urgent this really is.

We already have someone. This is an invitation, not a refusal. The client is telling you the category is already in their budget and their habits. The question is not whether to replace the incumbent but where the incumbent is falling short, and a client who is having this conversation at all has already answered that in their own mind.

Send me something over. This is the most misread of all. It is rarely a request for a document. It is a request to end the conversation without having to say no, and a professional who sends the document has agreed to that. The right response is a question, not an attachment: what specifically would be useful to see, and what would it help them decide.

I need to speak to my partners. This is a statement that the client is not the only decision maker and, more often, that they do not yet feel equipped to make the case internally. The professional's job is not to wait but to help them make it: what will the partners ask, what will they need to see, and would it help for the professional to be in that room.

Read as instructions, each of these keeps the conversation alive and moves it forward. Read as rejections, each ends it. The difference is not confidence in the abstract. It is knowing what the words mean.

Confidence Is Not a Personality. It Is a Rehearsed Position.

Firms tend to assume that some of their people are natural at business development and others are not, and that this is a fixed distribution. It is not. What looks like natural confidence is, almost without exception, a rehearsed position. The partner who discusses fees without flinching has decided in advance what the fee is, why it is that figure, and what they will say when it is questioned. The one who flinches has not, and is working it out in front of the client.

Fee confidence in particular can be built in a single afternoon. It requires 3 things: a clear view of what the work is worth to the client in their own terms, a fee that has been set with that in mind rather than by looking sideways at competitors, and a decision, made in calm conditions, about what the professional will and will not do when challenged. A professional who walks into a conversation with those 3 settled does not need to be a natural. They need to have prepared, which is a thing every professional already knows how to do.

The same is true of every objection above. Each has a position that can be prepared in advance and rehearsed with a colleague before it is needed in front of a client. Firms that do this stop talking about which of their people are good at selling and start talking about which conversations they have prepared for. That is a considerably more useful conversation to have.

Cross-Selling Happens by Accident Until Someone Designs It.

Most firms have more revenue sitting inside their existing client base than in any lead list they could buy, and most of it never surfaces. The client who instructs the firm on one matter has, in almost every case, 2 or 3 others they would happily bring to the same people, and they will never mention them unless asked. The professional running the matter is focused on the matter. Nobody else in the firm knows the client exists.

This is not a cultural problem to be solved with a value about collaboration. It is a structural one, and it has a structural answer. A firm that asks, at a fixed point in every engagement, what else the client is dealing with and who else in the firm should know, converts cross-selling from an accident into a habit. The point is not to sell. It is to notice, and to have somewhere to put what has been noticed.

The Commercial Diagnostic. 12 Questions a Firm Can Ask Itself.

Before any firm we work with begins a programme, it sits a commercial diagnostic. The full version involves confidential interviews, a pipeline pulled apart into what is real and what is stale, and a look at how the firm tracks and reports its commercial activity. The questions beneath it, however, can be asked by any managing partner of any fee earner this week, and the answers will tell them most of what they need to know. Ask them of 3 or 4 people separately. The variance in the answers is the finding.

On leads. How many enquiries reached you in the last 90 days, and how many did you speak to? Of those you did not speak to, what happened to them? How do you decide, and how quickly, that a lead is not worth pursuing? What did the last 3 you dismissed have in common?

On prospects. Name your 5 most likely instructions in the next 90 days. For each, what was the last contact, when, and what was agreed as the next step? Which of them have you qualified twice? Which have you written a proposal for without a fact find?

On objections. What was the last objection you heard, in the client's words? What did you say? What is your position on your own fee, and when did you last say it aloud to someone who pushed back?

On the firm. When did you last introduce a client to a colleague in another practice area, and how did that come about? Where is your pipeline written down, and who else can see it?

A firm in which those answers are consistent, specific and recent has a commercial discipline whether or not it has ever called it that. A firm in which they are vague, various or absent has the partner problem, and it is costing more than the leads it complains about.

Where All This Leaves the Managing Partner.

The managing partner of a service firm is usually carrying 2 beliefs at once. The first is that the firm's people are excellent, which is true. The second is that the market is hard, the leads are poor and business development is a matter of temperament, which is not. Holding both allows the firm to explain its commercial results without ever having to change how it wins work, and it is a comfortable place to sit for exactly as long as the competition sits there too.

The alternative asks less than it appears to. It does not require the firm's professionals to become salespeople, and it does not require a course. It requires that someone who understands the true value of what is already arriving at the firm, and the difference between a lead and a prospect, looks at what is in front of it. It requires the 5 objections to be understood as what they are. And it requires the positions to be prepared before they are needed, in the same way the firm's professionals prepare for everything else they do well.

The leads were never the problem. The pipeline the firm believes it does not have is sitting in its inbox, and the 16% is sitting in conversations its people are currently leaving too early. Both are recoverable, and neither requires anything the firm does not already own.

About us.

Shrine London provides private advisory and leadership development for owner-led businesses and professional firms navigating growth, complexity and transition. Our work sits with partners, leadership teams and boards at the moments when the way a business wins work needs to catch up with the quality of the work it does.

Glenn Dobson leads the advisory practice following more than 30 years of building, scaling and selling companies across 22 countries, including a global brand acquired as part of a £35m group. That experience, applied across more than 60 transactions advised on both sides of the table, began in every case with the same discipline: winning the mandate, building the relationship and converting the opportunity. Named CEO of the Year by CEO Monthly in 2021 and 2025, he continues to advise owners and senior teams on growth, control and composure through change.

Engagements are selective and fully confidential. Shrine London works quietly, embedding structure and stability into the moments that define an organisation's next chapter. Direct contact with Mr Dobson is available on request.

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