

Developing business on a shoestring



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Forget the logic about counter-cyclical investment, when cash is in short supply discretionary budgets feel the pain. This is even more the case in businesses with high fixed and semi-fixed cost bases like professional service firms. It can therefore be no surprise that business development and marketing budgets across the professional services sector are pared to the bone. For marketers, the challenge shifts from grand plans to doing more with less – developing business on a shoestring!

The smart marketer will see this as an opportunity for repositioning rather than a threat to their tenure. It is a chance to add, transparently and demonstrably, to the success of their firm (by acting smart rather than spending big) and delivering measurable improvements in performance. In so doing they create value for the business and a level of professional respect which is more difficult to achieve by simply exercising the corporate cheque book.

Above anything else, this requires prioritisation and a judgment to be made as to which avenues are most likely to deliver decent and quick returns. Ansoff's matrix is unambiguous in its recommendations – focus on existing clients and existing services! This is true for all products, services and markets, but has a particular resonance in the professions. Clients buy intangible, high-value, high-risk services and trust plays a key role in the purchase decision. Trust is heavily shaped by two factors – relationship experience and service track record. In other words using a firm (and individuals within it) with whom you have an established rapport for work in which they have a strong existing track record.

It's doubly important in these economic times because these existing services are also the areas in which one should be most efficient and best able to reduce client costs without eroding margin. Much better to process engineer something with which one is already familiar than to attempt the equivalent of a 100 yard hole-in-one with a new service area.

Translating this into action on the ground, three areas of client development should receive attention – service quality feedback (and follow up to plug gaps), key client management and cross-selling. Each of these can be driven internally without the need for significant external expenditure, each has the potential to deliver fast returns and each allows the business development team to work closely alongside client facing professionals with a strong sense of common purpose.

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