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By Christina Le Beau

From lawyers to super salespeople

It's a dirty job, but someone's gotta do it

Thad Felton wrote one name, then another and another. College buddies, neighbors, parents of his kids' classmates, that friend of his in-laws. The list grew. Then Mr. Felton, a partner with Arnstein & Lehr LLP in Chicago, got down to business.

Who needs a lawyer? Who knows someone who needs a lawyer? Were colleagues in other professions interested in teaming up to cross-sell services? Was anyone hosting an event that would give him a chance to meet new people?

The exercise, part of a sales training session, was enlightening, and not just because Mr. Felton hadn't realized how many people he knew.

Like many lawyers, Mr. Felton, 39, a litigator, was skeptical that anyone could teach him to think and act like a sales guy. But competition and savvy consumers mean that being a lawyer today is a lot like selling any other service.

"Clients are looking at more than the name," Mr. Felton says. "They're shopping around, looking at cost, service and results."

THE BIG GUNS

Rainmaker partners used to work quiet deals and nurture client relationships that lasted generations. Now they need "messages" and strategies to keep clients from changing law firms like they do phone plans. And they need to keep bringing in new clients.



"Clients are looking at more than the name. They're shopping around, looking at cost, service and results." — Thad Felton (with Deb Knupp of Akina Corp.) on why he overcame his skepticism about sales training. Photo: Callie Lipkin

So Mr. Felton's firm hired Akina Corp., a 5-year-old Boston company that does most of its work in Chicago. Akina's niche is sales consulting for companies, but in the last three years the company has focused on law firms, which today make up about 25% of its business.

None of the major law associations keeps statistics on the trend, but most say they've seen an increase in the number of firms adding sales training to their budgets. Deb Knupp, 39, managing partner in Akina's Chicago office, figures about half of all law firms use sales training of some kind.

Akina offers both one-shot workshops and a 12-week program that combines group training with

individual weekly coaching. Single workshops run from \$5,000 for a half day to \$13,000 for a full day. The 12-week program costs \$5,000 to \$6,000 per attorney.

Mr. Felton figures he's brought in 15 to 20 new clients since doing the 12-week program two years ago. But it wasn't until nearly the end of his training that he thought it might actually work.

"When you think about developing business, you think about asking someone for business, making chitchat and hoping there's a spark," Mr. Felton says. "But I learned that developing business does not have to be uncomfortable."

SMARTER TACTICS

That's because Akina's techniques focus on "building relationships with intention," says Paul Trout, 36, a partner in the Chicago Akina office. There's no hard sell, no mass distribution of business cards at cocktail parties. It's more about finding legitimate reasons to contact people you haven't talked to in a while, or learning to keep doors open even if the contact doesn't immediately pay off.

Group training sessions offer techniques that play out in detail during weekly one-on-ones, when coach and student talk through specific prospects.

Mr. Felton recalls one solo session when he and Ms. Knupp talked about a good friend of his who worked for a small company in an industry that interests him. "Before that, it never would have occurred to me to use her as a contact because she wasn't the one making (vendor) decisions."

But call her he did. Soon after, Mr. Felton had lunch with the company's president. The two hit it off, and work followed. "Even if that hadn't worked out, I would have made an impression, made a contact," Mr. Felton says.

Other lawyers have had similar experiences. Gary Blackman, 46, a partner with Levenfeld Pearlstein LLC in Chicago, has lost track of many people he's met over the years, but since his training last year with Akina, he makes an effort to stay in touch.

"It only takes two or three times a year with an e-mail, a coffee, whatever, to keep them in your world," he says.

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