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New attorneys should 'play the long game' to land clients

In the movie "Glengarry Glen Ross," the salesmen are preoccupied with obtaining the "good leads," which amount to decent prospects who are more likely to purchase what the salesmen are selling.

Bad leads amount to prospects who are unlikely or unable to purchase anything. They are viewed as a painful waste of time and the salesmen resent having to spend any time, energy or cost pursuing bad leads.

At some point in their careers, seasoned and successful lawyers who have already committed years marketing to prospects should begin carefully discerning between good leads and bad ones before investing time and energy marketing to prospects.

Presumably, these attorneys have already honed their sales pitch and feel comfortable entertaining prospects and clients. They have established a broad network of relationships through their years of coffees, lunches, dinners, sports outings and other forms of connecting with prospects.

They should invest their marketing efforts on prospects (the good leads) who are now positioned to refer them legal business.

But before these marketing veterans arrived, they were once just young and eager rookies looking for their first marketing opportunity, regardless of whether it was a good or bad lead. Anything which enabled them to practice their marketing craft.

This article is directed to all the young and eager attorneys out there who are wondering how they will ever start to land clients.

For these relative novices, my advice is to play the long game. Don't worry about landing business today, tomorrow or even this year.

Focus further down the road — three to five years at the least. Spend those years developing relationships with prospects who, for the time being, might be characterized as "bad leads" with no ability to engage your services. But, in time, those same bad leads can turn into the best leads of your career.

My opinion formed years ago when a young lawyer I know shared that she had an upcoming lunch with a prospect.

I asked who the prospect was and the lawyer shared that it was probably a waste of time as the prospect was also young and likely not at a level at her company where she could readily dole out legal work to outside counsel.

I asked the young lawyer where the prospect would be, in her career, in five years.

Answering honestly, she said, "I don't have any way of knowing."

"Exactly," I responded. "You have no way of knowing. You just don't know where the prospect will be down the road. And don't you want to be there when she finally arrives at a place where she can engage you or your law firm?"

Make no mistake, going out and networking and marketing to prospects who have no ability to give you an immediate return on your investment of time, energy and money takes tremendous discipline.

And by discipline, I mean approaching each prospect with the

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same degree of preparedness, eagerness and professionalism — even if that prospect can accurately be described as a bad lead. This is because an unknown per-

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centage of those bad leads you devote your efforts to will, in fact, evolve into paying clients one day. My suggestion is to approach each lead or prospect the same way a major league baseball player faces a pitcher.

Every time a professional baseball player steps into the batter's box and faces a major league pitcher, the batter prepares the same way. That preparation does not vary or change depending on whether the pitcher he is facing has a Cy Young pedigree or has just been called up from a minor league farm team. The batter's preparation before the first pitch — the concentration, the tightening of his batting gloves, the digging of his cleats into the dirt for better balance and power are always the same.

To be a successful hitter, the batter must be consistent with his preparation and approach to each at bat and he must carry measured optimism to the plate every time he steps in the batter's box, regardless of who he may be facing.

Day after day, night after night or season after season, the batter must approach each pitch with discipline and preparedness.

If young lawyers follow this example and approach each marketing prospect or lead, bad or good, with the same degree of discipline, preparedness and measured optimism, eventually (perhaps years down the road) he or she will have taken enough swings at the ball to make real contact.

And when that happens, when you see a once bad lead turn into a paying client, you have truly made the "show."