

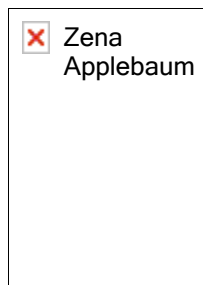


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By Zena Applebaum

Pitching to partners – why firms need CI

Zena Applebaum believes that the best way for fee earners to nurture their client relationships, differentiate themselves and maintain their roles as trusted advisors is through a robust Competitive Intelligence programme.

When I mentioned to a long-time Legal Marketing Strategist and Consultant that I was writing a article about pitching the importance and usefulness of Competitive Intelligence (CI) to partners, she asked, "do you really need to pitch, or do you just have to hang out your shingle?" I thought about her question; I realised that once your presence as a CI practitioner is known to a firm and its partners, your shingle is often good enough. However, until you achieve interest, buy-in, and most importantly trust, you do need to pitch. The good news is that the pitch is the same pitch the fee earners have been hearing and giving for years – get to know your client.

Getting to know your clients

Since my experience is in the legal profession, this article will focus on lawyers and clients, but it can just as easily be adapted to suit accountants, consultants, engineers and the like. From the first day of starting to work in the legal industry, whether as an articling student, a legal assistant or a marketer, you are taught that in this business (and it is a business as much as it is a service) it is all about client relationships and the service provided to those clients. Legal services have evolved to a point where it is assumed that if you are a qualified lawyer, you and your firm can provide any necessary legal work. The real differentiator between firms is in the service and the commitment to the client relationship. Clients should not be left waiting in the reception area; boardrooms should be comfortable and help clients feel at ease; legal opinions should be expertly drafted without any errors; client entertainment should be of the highest caliber. The client/lawyer relationship is not unlike a traditional fledgling romance, where the initial excitement can sway either party and maintaining the relationship despite competition is of the utmost importance. So, what will help lawyers make their clients swoon and live in a perpetual connected bliss? It is not fancy expensive dinners, lavish entertainment, or even the right coffee brand in the boardrooms. Expertly crafted legal opinions and dexterously articulated defensive legal contracts will certainly help, but buyers of legal service everywhere will tell you that what they really want from a law firm is a group of lawyers who are responsive and smart. Clients want lawyers who meet their needs by delivering timely targeted advice.

Much of the same advice provided to daters, could apply to lawyers and their clients, or in the case of CI practitioners, to lawyers and their service providers. For example, an online dating advice blog geared to men, authored by The Bitter Single Guy¹, provides its readers with a series of tips for love, including reading stuff and exercising outside.

Whether or not the advice will work in helping to ignite an everlasting romance, the advice is excellent for a lawyer looking to win or retain client business, and more to the point, the advice is the first step in pitching the importance of CI to the partners at a firm. If clients want smart lawyers, then I cannot think of a better way for lawyers to nurture their client relationships, differentiate themselves in a crowded competitive landscape, and maintain their roles as trusted business advisors, than through engaging in and supporting a robust CI programme.

Relationship management

Competitive intelligence is defined by each organisation as it employs the discipline in a slightly different way. One definition suggests that CI is "the tracking and monitoring of competitor behaviour to support the firm's strategic and tactical decision making" ². I tend to think of CI as the bringing of the outside world into the firm, and actively applying external influences internally to shape decisions regarding the firm, its clients and its competitors. As with the flexibility in its definition and place within a firm, CI can be both strategic and tactical. The hardest part of doing CI – the part where skill, sophistication and a certain amount of intuition come into play – is in balancing the various aspects of competitive intelligence and creating a function that is unique and targeted to your firm. Put another way, tactically knowing what to bring to bear, when, and most importantly how to share this information.

One of the easiest ways to pitch CI is to demonstrate how client service can be improved through the use of competitive intelligence. CI can help lawyers understand the business climate of their clients. In today's information savvy age, clients expect their service providers to be trusted advisors who are knowledgeable about their business. This means that their law firms are informed about their business, their industry and environment in which they work. Consider the Bitter Single Guys' first point about reading. How do you create a CI programme that fulfills this need of constant, actionable current awareness and encourage your lawyers to not only say that they understand their clients, but make sure that they actually do? You keep your lawyers connected and in the know.

Connect with your client

It is important to start small and get a couple of wins before trying to build out a fully formed CI programme. Start by looking for an easy opening. Responding to an RFP for example, can be a great way to establish CI as an added value client service. CI can help a law firm understand the prospect of an end goal with smart, targeted service. As soon as an RFP comes in, the CI function should undertake an analysis of the prospect and bring a market perspective to your firm's response. It is very important not to take any previous relationship for granted, and instead to do a complete CI analysis of the prospect and its market while answering the questions proposed by the RFP. Typical questions to ask are: Is the company a big player or a small player? Can the firm provide service at an appropriate level to support this type of client? Is the prospect a pre or post IPO technology company? How is a company's lifecycle going to impact the type of legal work a firm can reasonably hope to get in the future? Is the RFP issuer a new entrant in the law firm's regional marketplace? The CI professional can help a law firm attempt to answer these questions and use the answers to determine not only if it should respond to an RFP, but more importantly, how to respond. An experienced CI practitioner should help the business development team get to know the client well enough so that the RFP response compliments the client or prospect's style, language, and corporate feel.

In addition to understanding the client, it can be useful to consider which competitors might be responding to the RFP or who else may be submitting proposals. How much smarter will your lawyers and law firm appear when they can talk to a client or prospect and know their market position, understand their recent financials, as well as who else might be doing work for that client? In addition to being able to speak confidently to a client, imagine the opportunities afforded to the firm through this type of CI for cross selling and other business development. Using an RFP process as the catalyst, a firm can start to build up and maintain a series of dossiers on its prospects and clients. This warehouse of information becomes the strategic difference in the client service. A CI informed firm is able to respond to its clients with a conversant and evolving view, demonstrating the value proposition of one firm over another.

Get personal

CI professionals rely partially on the facts contained in dossiers and partially on experience – on entrenching themselves in their firm's practices and looking for the links between practices and lawyers. This is what could be described by The Bitter Single Guy as "exercising outside". The best way to build trust within a firm, get buy-in, and to pitch the value of CI to partners, is to exploit the work that you do. Celebrate your RFP wins, share your dossiers, and solicit feedback from other

areas of the firm. Do this, the same way lawyers build relationships with their clients – slowly and steadily. It is unrealistic to expect that the first time a lawyer speaks to a client or responds to a specific RFP that the firm will win the work. CI in a firm is exactly the same. Build relationships in the firm by leaving your comfort zone, both physically and within the work context. Walk the halls, see what people are reading and talking about. Get to know your audience so, as you would respond to an RFP matching and mirroring the prospect's language, you will learn how to communicate with your lawyers in an effective manner. Use this new found relationship to alert them to a regulatory change that may affect their clients or a proposed merger that will change the competitive landscape for a client. As much as CI is about bringing the outside world in, it is also about leveraging connections and building relationships within the firm to become a trusted partner in the quest for ultimate client service to firm clients.

KISS

Once you know your audience, you will also know that you must always Keep Intel Smart and Simple (KISS). Lawyers are very busy, and billable time is at a premium. To maintain the relationship and continue to get feedback about issues that are important to lawyers and their clients, remember to communicate in ways that are simple but smart and targeted. Keep reports to a single page, load up on the visuals and use as many tangible examples with client names as possible.

Pitching to partners is not easy and it will take time. Celebrate the small wins, earn your partners' trust, and remember in the end, that the pitch to partners for CI holds the very same value proposition of any legal service offering: better client service.

¹ <http://bittersingleguy.com/category/tips-forlove/>

² Johnson, Arik. *The Top 12 Priorities for Competitive Intelligence* October 6, 2005 Aurora WDC website article

Zena Applebaum is a CI practitioner with Canadian law firm Bennett Jones LLP. Contact applebaumz@bennettjones.com for comments or questions on competitive intelligence in professional services.

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