

How you articulate your understanding of a client's needs often determines whether you get hired, says consultant Joey Asher.

MAKING RAIN

How to Bring In the Business

Building clientele one conversation at a time

Communicating. A simple act that can make or break a lawyer's success record. Communication skills can't be bought—but they can be learned.

"People hire lawyers they feel can help their business succeed," says Joey Asher, president of Speechworks, a communications consulting firm in Atlanta. "How you articulate your understanding of their needs often determines whether you get hired."

But while interpersonal skills play a significant role in a lawyer's success, some attorneys give more attention to their business-card style than to their communication techniques. And e-mail and voicemail often replace personal interaction and offer a convenient cover to hide behind.

Many attorneys are beginning to realize the importance of personal contact in their business development, client retention and marketing efforts. Consequently, developing communication skills has become an important part of training and education. Call it Extreme Makeover: Personality Pizzazz.

"It's important to develop a style that connects with people," says Asher. "The way you speak, eye contact, facial expressions and the energy in your voice all affect the impression you make." Some people naturally possess a more comfortable and connected style, he adds. But the rest can learn.

Asher, a former practicing attorney, offers open workshops and develops custom training programs designed to improve communication skills. Groups range in size—smaller groups allow more personal-



ized feedback—and offer participants the opportunity to role-play common social and business situations, while video cameras record the interaction.

The playback often surprises people.

"People tend to imagine they are better than they appear," says Asher. "Often they come across hesitant and much less connected in their communications. Seeing yourself on camera can be a real awakening."

Alston & Bird has integrated communication training into its educational program. Sessions focus on several levels of communicating: informal situations, such as small meetings; semiformal presentations, such as marketing presentations; and more formal appearances in front of large groups, such as a shareholders' meeting or CLE presentation.

The firm's training director, partner William C. Humphreys Jr., says lawyers—from rookies to seasoned veterans—attend sessions tailored to address the typical situations they will encounter. "Newer associates would often be giving more of the smaller presentations, while older attorneys are more likely to do the formal presentations," he says.

The firm considers this training an important part of business development. "A client's impression comes from how you present yourself—whether you sound confident and competent," he says. "Outside of appearance, communication is one of the first impressions you make. And you can easily overcome being underdressed when you're a good communicator."

The training programs have generated

good feedback from participants, Humphreys says. Alston & Bird plans to expand the programs, eventually making sessions available to all its lawyers.

But workshops and group sessions aren't the only ways to sharpen your interpersonal skills. Business development coach Robin Hensley, president of Raising the Bar, meets monthly with individual clients, often strategizing effective communication methods to meet their marketing and development goals.

According to Hensley, planning is a vital component. Always prepare for meetings. Identify key issues and do background research on the person you will meet. "Searching the Internet can provide a lot of information," she says. "Finding out their personal interests might give you a tidbit that helps make an immediate bond."

In your zeal to impress, don't forget the one critical element of communication. "Always listen and ask questions," says Hensley. "Even the great rainmakers need to be reminded of this. People want to be listened to. A good communicator should listen more than they talk."

Developing a good style of communication is like any other skill: Practice makes perfect. Asher recommends rehearsing conversations, even closing your office door to speak out loud. The work will be rewarded, he says. "When the client realizes you understand his goals, the barriers come down and you're well positioned to propose the ways you can help. And that's when they're going to hire you."

—Karen Dean