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Moving from survival mode to growth

The past 18 months has seen many professional and engineering services firms batten down the hatches as the pandemic took a grip on our lives and the economy. Many of these organisations are now moving from survival mode into growth mode and while this is hugely encouraging there are a few things to consider to ensure the growth is as effective as possible.

A recent McKinsey article* tells us (among other things) that growth comes from both short and long-term initiatives – quick wins and strategic transformation, that execution beats over analysing and measurement is a source of competitive advantage. Working with professional services and engineering firms since 2004, I have seen the economy rollercoaster in action and the impact upturns and downturns have on these organisations.

Service based businesses have two fundamental assets: People and time. Sure, the people have expertise to offer as their asset and there are more and more examples of these companies offering technology innovations but at their core these businesses measure their income in terms of the numbers of hours their people invoice. What this means is that in strong markets the biggest problem is resourcing and when times are tough the biggest problem is too much overhead. The response? Reduce the overhead. Often, the first to go are those who are lower down on the utilisation spreadsheet which can (and in my experience often does) include work winners.

Now, I am going to declare my bias here! I have been in the world of business development and client relationship management for my entire career and so, yes I see this through a particular lens. I accept that when market conditions dictate that the flow of work is reduced to a trickle and clients are in their own 'lockdown' it is difficult to keep paying often expensive salaries when the return on that investment can't be realised any time soon. However, now is the time to put the foot down on the accelerator and the best way to do this is to encourage all client facing people to get involved.

To ensure that you are going to make the most of this activity it is important to do three things:

1. Get focussed on where the opportunities are
2. Have more face to face BD meetings
3. Measure the effectiveness

Lets have a quick look at each of these steps:

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Getting focussed:

Whilst we don't want to be struck down with 'analysis paralysis' we also don't want to waste useful time, effort and energy going after the wrong type of work. Here three quick questions to help getting you focussed:

- Is the market strong for this kind of work?
- What is our reputation like for this type of work?
- Do we already have relationships with decision makers?

If you can answer a solid YES to each of these it is probably worth putting a business development plan together. These plans needn't be overly complicated but should focus on getting in front of target clients through referral, valuable content marketing.

Face to face BD meetings:

Even when selling into the public sector who almost always buy through a tender process, nothing beats getting in front of clients, both existing and new. People (still) buy from people and so your people need to be better than the people from other organisations. When I say 'better' I mean better at motivating clients to buy not better technically!

These meetings provide fantastic opportunities, if not immediately then some time in the future. For more information on how to ensure these meetings maximise the opportunity please see our [link to BD Meetings guide].

Measure the effectiveness:

It has been said that it is difficult to measure selling activity. In terms of looking at the numbers and working out what income was due to what particular marketing/BD activity or was it simply down to market conditions is difficult. However, that is trying to measure the output and we suggest that it is much easier and more effective to measure the inputs e.g.

- Number of meetings with decision makers
- Introductions made to colleagues with other expertise
- Referrals from clients to others in their network
- Opportunities identified at meetings
- Follow up meetings with other stakeholders

As firms lift the shutters and head back out into the market those who are ready, willing and able to spread the business development load to many (if not all) client facing people will certainly reap the rewards.

[*https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/seven-principles-for-achieving-transformational-growth\)](https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/seven-principles-for-achieving-transformational-growth)