To Plan or Not to Plan
You have just confirmed an initial business development meeting with a potential client you have been marketing to over the last year. Are you excited? Of course you are! After all this is the type of client that could bring your firm a six figure income year on year if you were successful at winning them.

Like many professionals you are very busy but recognise the need to put some time in the diary to prepare for this important opportunity. This is a client you have put significant marketing energy into and it would be crazy to not prepare to have a really impactful first meeting. If it all goes to plan you may even come out of it with an opportunity to propose for some work!

Your mind is full of positive thoughts and emotions about this exciting opportunity. Imagine the kudos if you are seen to be the one who lands this client for your firm. Others have tried in the past but all of them have failed. You control your emotions and allow your rational professional brain to kick back in and remember the FIVE P’s – proper planning prevents poor performance.

So you start to capture your checklist:

- Research – figure out what the client is up to and which services we may be able to sell
- Check the availability of my ‘big hitting’ colleagues. We need to impress the client with our talent
- Check logistics – travel etc
- Put meeting in diary – put a few hours aside in case it goes really well
- Prepare collateral / brochure packs / PowerPoints
- Conflict check
- Practise our firm’s positioning statement – the one marketing gave us that emphasises our client focus and global strength
- Prepare answers to questions the client may ask
- Identify possible weaknesses of the incumbent
- Agree objective with team of coming out with at least one opportunity

With this amount of planning you are convinced nothing can go wrong! Or can it?

Whilst the desire to plan rigorously is to be respected is it just possible that too much planning is a barrier to having the best possible initial meetings with prospective clients?

Let’s examine the typical checklist for a moment and consider the dos and don’ts of each:

**Research**

**Do.** A definite do! Clients expect you to have done your research. It would be foolish to begin a meeting unprepared. Use all the methods available to you to gain background information on the client. Find out as much about a client, their business, sector and world as you possibly can. Understanding the history and present is important. Understanding the future is probably more important as that’s where your opportunities will be.

Many professionals will use this research to identify which of their services they should ‘pitch’ to the potential client. This might just be the biggest single don’t of the research phase.

The desire to consider which of your services may help this client is well intentioned. After all, you want to demonstrate value and ensure the hour they spend with you is a good use of their time. However, all too often this can lead to the ‘spray and pray’ approach to an initial business development meeting. Put simply, based on your research you may be tempted to systematically talk through all the issues you have identified and then ‘spray’ the client with your expert services that are clearly the answer to all of the client’s problems!
This approach is best described as the premature pounce! Of course you will often be right about the opportunities and issues faced by your clients and clearly you have the expertise to help. However, here’s the problem, the only thing that truly matters is what’s in your prospective client’s mind (and not yours!). They know their world much better than you will ever know.

So what should you use your research for when preparing to meet?

It is NOT to come up with solutions. This initial research should help you to prepare your ‘funnel’ map of great credibility-building open questions that will motivate a client to share their insight into the world they operate in. This approach (on the basis that you know how to listen) will allow you to discover which opportunities and issues are front of mind for a client. This will guide you (when the time is right) to introduce the elements of your firm’s expertise that are relevant for those areas your prospective client is most interested in receiving advice on.

Asking questions to truly understand a client is the fastest way to identify opportunities. Making assumptions from your research and spraying solutions prematurely is the slowest way of winning business. It is also likely to make you look like the last person a client needs - a pushy salesperson - often leading to a polite ending to a meeting with little opportunity to take the relationship forward.

**Check availability of ‘big hitting’ colleagues**

You want to impress. You want to show clients that you have great talent whose expertise will be invaluable. When planning who you want to accompany you it does make sense to consider (without making too many assumptions) the expertise of your colleagues and likely fit with the potential new client.

It is important that you don’t plan attendees based on the single criteria of technical talent. You should consider their potential fit and chemistry with you, the client and other attendees. Of equal importance are the ‘selling’ and business development skills of your colleagues.

For an initial meeting you should attend with colleagues who are highly skilled at this type of meeting. They should know how to make a strong initial impression. They should be highly competent in the skills of building rapport and motivating clients to share their thoughts with you. Take colleagues with highly developed questioning skills. Take colleagues who listen. Take colleagues who really listen!

The default choice of selecting your ‘technical big hitters’ may turn out to be a mistake. These colleagues can often be much more powerful at future meetings which are likely to be more focused on specific areas based on the deep understanding you achieved in earlier discussions. Choosing the right people for the right meeting at the right time will accelerate your business development success.

**Check logistics and travel**

**Do.** Can’t think of any reason why you wouldn’t. Plan to arrive early, never on time and never, ever late.

**Put meeting in the diary**

**Do.** Always put time in your diary to research, prepare and rehearse an effective first meeting. Another tip: always agree a time frame with the client for the meeting. An hour is often the optimum. Don’t run the risk of turning up expecting an hour when the client may have 30 minutes in their mind. This can only result in a bad start. Respect the client’s time and they will respect yours.
Prepare collateral / brochure packs / PowerPoints

**Don’t.** Please Don’t! Collateral (containing valuable insights for clients) and brochures (fact/feature based information about your firm and services) may be relevant at some time during the business development process. The key is relevance and timing.

The risk in attending a first meeting with pre-prepared collateral and brochures is that often the professional will feel the need to share them at the meeting or leave them with the client whether they are relevant or not. With the right people demonstrating the right skills you will have a very effective meeting which will motivate a client to continue the relationship with you to the appropriate next stage.

Do use your most valuable collateral (you will note we didn’t say brochures) as a follow up to the meeting the day after. Along with a short summary of your understanding, agreed next steps and your relevant collateral based on your understanding of the client during the meeting will be a powerful example of your listening and add real value to the client. Do use your best material between meetings to maintain client enthusiasm.

**Conflict Check**

**Do.** Always.

**Practice our positioning statement**

Do practise your introduction and opening to the meeting. Don’t ever think this is a stock introduction and that the same line reeled off in automatic pilot mode is ever the right way to begin a meeting.

When preparing your introduction it is worth remembering what is likely to be in most people’s minds when they meet someone for the first time:

- Who are you?
- Are you worth listening to?
- Do you understand my world?
- Have you done your research?
- When will you be leaving?!

Clients see themselves as different. Even if your experience suggests clients are often similar it is essential that your positioning is tailored and fresh for the client you are meeting for the first time. We encourage practice and rehearsal.

The best introductions we have heard are short, sharp, relevant and genuine. Use this checklist to help you prepare a great start to an initial business development meeting:

1. Check time available – “When we set up this meeting we agreed an hour, is that still ok?”

   (If the answer is anything less than the agreed time the most emotionally intelligent professionals will always offer to reschedule. If you agree to a shorter time avoid the trap of trying to rush or getting to solutions quickly. Just do the very best start to an initial meeting and when your time is up the client will be motivated to schedule another meeting).

2. Use one sentence to give an accurate flavour of what your firm is about (avoid sounding like a speaking brochure).
3 Move quickly to demonstrate your knowledge and interest in the client’s sector. Give one or two credibility building statements regarding your knowledge of the client’s world.

4 Give evidence of your research into the client (which goes well beyond the front page of their website). This research will be evidence of your professional approach and genuine interest in the client and their world.

5 Set the scene for the meeting. Let the client know that you have not made assumptions from your research.

6 Provide reasons why the client should be motivated to allow you to ask them more questions to find out about them and their business.

7 Move into the questioning and understanding phase of a great first meeting.

In a nutshell, planning a great introduction will establish credibility, competence and compatibility and motivate the client to engage. You have set the scene for a great first meeting!

Prepare answers to the questions a client may ask

Do. From your experience you should be competent in answering common questions or objections that your clients typically ask. Don’t ever make any assumptions that these questions will be asked by every client. Do plan with your colleagues how you, as a team, will handle questions and how you hand the baton of the conversation to a colleague (without the client noticing) if the situation should ever occur.

Identify possible weaknesses of incumbents

Do your research into incumbents and competition. Don’t ever use this research to assume your firm’s own strengths and don’t ever directly highlight incumbents’ or competitors’ weaknesses. Use your questioning skills to understand your client’s view of other firms. Their view is the only view that matters. If you listen you will know when, how and which of your firm’s advantages to highlight.

Agree objective to come out with at least one opportunity

Do consider your overall objective for an initial meeting. Don’t ever make your objective to be to come out with an opportunity or even an instruction. No one is suggesting that these will never be an outcome. This would be desirable but should never be the objective.

This objective could be your biggest barrier to having the most impactful and effective first meeting. Do consider your overriding objective to be to motivate the client to want to carry on in dialogue with our firm and to continue the relationship to the most appropriate next step. That may sound slightly ‘woolly’ to some. But think about it. If you do enough to motivate the client to want to meet again you are one step closer to securing that first instruction.

Returning to the title of this article: ‘To Plan or Not to Plan?’ The answer is clearly “yes”. But to over-plan is dangerous and can lead either to manipulative questions or to a ‘spray and pray’ type meeting, neither of which are likely to lead to success.

You will attend lots of different types of business development meetings – and flexibility will always be key.

Consider this picture for a moment. As you leave the client’s office they watch you from the meeting room window with a huge smile. Whilst they may resist the temptation to wave you back and tell you they can’t wait to meet you again the reality is they are impressed and see you as being highly credible, competent and compatible. In fact they kind of know that when the timing is right they will be working with you. They are actually looking forward to it. This is the type of meeting you should be planning for.