What listening taught me about leading growth in the AI era

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Your Voice

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Early in my first year at Lowenstein Sandler, a restructuring partner described a recurring challenge: Colleagues often waited until a client was in a serious bind to introduce him.

I heard a related concern from litigators, who found that lawyers sometimes hesitated to introduce them because, as one explanation went, “My clients don’t want to think about litigation.” By the time a need arose, the client might turn to a firm whose litigators they already knew.

Those conversations revealed more than a cross-selling opportunity. To anticipate what clients may need, lawyers must understand their clients’ businesses and build relationships with colleagues across their own firms. A list of practice capabilities can tell them who is available, but it cannot tell them which colleague would connect well with a particular client or when an introduction would be helpful.

I heard that restructuring partner’s story while working toward a goal I had set for my first year: meeting individually and in person with every partner at the firm. I came close, holding more than 125 conversations in just over a year.

Since then, I have conducted more focused listening efforts around growth in particular markets and around artificial intelligence. I learned a great deal about where people saw opportunity, what worried them and what they needed from my team. Just as valuable, those meetings gave us the foundation for relationships we could draw on when it was time to make decisions together.

But listening creates an obligation. When someone shares an idea or a problem, they deserve to know what the listener will do with it, even if the answer is that they can’t solve it at that exact moment. Otherwise, a listening tour becomes an exercise in gathering requests (or collecting complaints).

That principle shaped how I developed market growth strategies. I asked different questions of firm leadership, partners working in a market and partners interested in recruiting there. I drew out themes, brought them back for reaction and refined the plans. The conversations helped us see the opportunities; returning to the same people helped test whether our proposed direction made sense.

Then came the harder work: execution. Law firms can spend significant time agreeing on a strategy and then struggle to carry it out. We need to assign responsibility, check progress, and be willing to acknowledge when an approach is not working. Recalibrating is part of executing a strategy, especially when client needs and the tools available to serve them are changing quickly.

We also need to hear directly from clients. Our Client Insights Program currently includes visits by our chair to clients identified by partners, with our business development team helping prepare for those conversations. Clients tell us where we are serving them well, what they wish we understood better, and where they are turning to other firms.

Past experience allowed me to see how valuable hearing directly from clients can be. A practice leader was initially reluctant to join a listening session with clients. He felt that as their lawyers, we should already know what was happening in their businesses.

After one conversation, a client told us that no other law firm had taken that kind of time to listen. The partner’s view changed. At a panel I moderated, a general counsel offered another reminder: “Sometimes my outside counsel forgets I’m a lawyer too.” Both experiences reminded me how easy it is to assume we know what clients want without asking them.

Data can also help us question our assumptions if we’re clear about what we’re trying to learn. For example, consider an event with more than 100 attendees. That may be considered a success, but attendance alone can’t tell us whether it achieved its purpose. Was the aim to build visibility for an emerging practice, deepen existing relationships, connect clients with one another, or open conversations with prospects? Each purpose calls for a different approach and a different measure of success.

Looking at past attendance and relationship history can make our planning more thoughtful. Someone who has attended multiple events without sending work is not automatically the wrong guest. They may be a valued relationship, a future source of referrals, or someone whose perspective enriches the discussion for everyone else. The useful questions are why we are inviting them, what value they will find in the room, and what conversation we hope will continue afterward.

That last step is often where the opportunity is lost. We put enormous care into the invitation, program and guest experience. Then everyone returns to their other priorities, and a promising connection hears from us only when the next invitation goes out months later. Data can help identify whom we want to

engage. Lawyers and business development professionals still have to make the introduction, listen during the event ,and follow up in a way that reflects what they heard.

AI raises a similar question about what we do with the information and capacity available to us. A partner recently asked why lawyers need a business development team if they can ask AI for what they need. It is a fair challenge. Lawyers can learn to write effective prompts, and these tools can help them prepare for meetings, explore their networks and develop a first draft.

That said, the value our teams bring must go further. A tool does not know everything a lawyer knows about a client's concerns, decision-makers or history with the firm. For business development professionals to provide better support with AI, lawyers have to share that context with us. We then need to understand their practices well enough to turn that context into useful and valuable advice. That exchange depends on relationships in both directions.

It also depends on giving people room to experiment. When someone brings forward an unfinished idea for using AI, a leader's first reaction can determine whether the next idea is ever shared. We can explore what might work, then apply the necessary safeguards: approved tools, client requirements and human review. AI can make an answer sound convincing even when it's working with incomplete information.

The time AI saves should give us more room to build relationships inside and outside the firm: spending time with clients, training associates, getting to know our colleagues' capabilities, and connecting the right people when a client could benefit. That is a better test of its value than the speed of any single draft.

I no longer think it is particularly useful to ask exactly where our work will take us in the coming years; the possibilities are moving too quickly. Instead, I am now asking what value we want to deliver in the next six to 12 months and what we need to learn along the way.

For any firm leader, the questions are straightforward: What are clients and colleagues telling us? What does the evidence add or challenge? And what will we do differently because we listened?

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