

A Marketer's Perspective on Transitioning into Business Development

BY MARISA VARGA, CPSM, LEED AP

Hedging a bet that, in seven years behind a desk, I had not lost my social skills, I let it be known within my organization that I sought a career in business development.

Some people are wired for the qualification, proposal, and presentation process. I enjoyed my internal marketing role but was passionate about working with business development and preconstruction personnel and about telling our story to prospective clients in compelling ways to differentiate our team. When I worked in the marketing department, I looked at business development people and thought, "That job is fun!"

Now, having made the move, I still think it is fun, but I have gained new insights into the actual day-to-day demands of the job. My best advice: Don't rush the change. Make sure you know yourself and what you're getting into. Successful marketers do not always find satisfaction or success as business development professionals.

I had some idea about the skills and knowledge needed in a business development position, but I didn't fully appreciate all the nuances of the job. As you read through the following list, ask yourself whether your skills and personality match up.

Management

- Letting Go: Establishing strategy is one thing; trusting others to produce materials is another
- Leadership: Ability to set your own direction
- Persistence: Getting in the door with target clients, and coping with rejections
- Getting a "GO": Finding the right project opportunity and gaining the approval to pursue it

- Teamwork: Working with many people to accomplish a goal
- Long Sales Cycles: Developing opportunities that may not produce immediate results

Networking

- Remaining Visible: Getting out of your cubicle and out of the office
- Networking: Going to events and building relationships
- Reciprocating: Sharing information and helping others
- Putting on Your Game Face: Gearing up for events that aren't always thrilling

Quantitative Results

- Financial Goals: Meeting objectives set by others; for example, sales goals
- Reporting: Utilizing the company sales system
- Sales Metrics: Tracking referrals, qualified leads, client meetings, shortlist and hit rates, number of debriefings, etc.
- Budgets: Managing budgets for branding, client entertainment, conferences, and overall marketing
- Client Satisfaction: Conducting client satisfaction surveys

The Plan

Having reviewed the list above, are your skills and personality a good match for business development? If the answer is "yes," then what path do you follow to enter the business development world? I chose between two options: 1) moving to our preconstruction department to obtain a better technical understanding of construction or 2) moving to a job site for a few years to experience the day-to-day building process. With the help of company mentors, I chose the former.

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Within the preconstruction department, I created an 18- to 24-month plan of assignments that would provide full understanding of how we estimate, bid, schedule, and plan our projects. It was an internship approach, even though I wasn't a recent graduate. Barton Malow used a similar approach to enrich the knowledge of several project engineers who were interested in project management, another career option.

If you are looking to move out of the marketing department in search of new opportunities, be assured that the skills you developed there are valuable. I was able to make meaningful contributions in developing new databases, training tools, and client materials while working in the preconstruction department—and now in our Industrial Group, too.

Starting Out

Be realistic: You may not have an option as to what market you'll represent. My first choice wasn't the Industrial Group, although it's where the opportunity presented itself. Coincidentally, I had a fair amount of industrial knowledge since my father and husband worked in this sector.

Marketing coordinators and managers may not have the built-in client network that many business development people do. My starting point was SMPS—involvement locally on the chapter board and service on national committees. Targeted client professional organizations, conferences, and programs are a great way to expand a network.

A key to business development is understanding targeted clients, including their services and customers. Moving into a new market requires a willingness to get educated. Reading industry publications and blogs and subscribing to news feeds clients read are great ways to better understand a market you serve.

Making the Leap

The number one reason Millennials give for leaving a company is the need for change. Before joining Barton Malow, my average tenure at a company had been two years. Thanks to new opportunities and options to grow, I've been with the firm over five years.

Still, many people happily spend 20+ years in the same position, and in working through this article, I started to question my need for change. Transitioning into different positions and departments within a company can be challenging, and I'm still working through these challenges.

Maintaining emotional fortitude is perhaps the most difficult test for business developers. So much energy and heart are invested in pursuing clients and projects. Time is spent making calls, researching, developing relationships, coordinating meetings, extending invitations, attending events, and producing qualifications, proposals, and presentations—and sometimes your firm is not selected.

I look at it this way: Facing rejection is a test of character. People in business development must have the ability to rebound and move forward with a positive attitude. There are new relationships to build, new strategies to create—and always new projects to win and celebrate. ■

About the Author



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