

Rainmaker Q&A: Davis Wright's Don Buder

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Don Buder is a senior mergers and acquisitions partner in Davis Wright Tremaine LLP's California business practice, based in the firm's San Francisco office. He is a strategic legal advisor and corporate counsel to emerging-growth and middle-market food and beverage, food tech and agricultural tech innovators and investors. Buder launched Davis Wright's next-gen tech program, which counsels clients at the convergence of emerging technologies and traditional industry sectors in which Davis Wright has a national reputation.



Don Buder

For over three decades Buder has tried to provide every client with three basic services: to find cost-effective solutions to legal and business problems; to offer advice that is direct and practical; and to keep the parties involved in any negotiation focused on their common business objectives. He believes that a lawyer is effective only if he can protect his clients' interests without frustrating their business judgment.

As part of the service he provides, Buder regularly participates in management team and strategic planning meetings with his clients.

Buder is currently vice chairman of the board of directors of KCETLink TV, a nonprofit public media company with broadcast operations in Los Angeles and San Francisco. He is also a member of the board of directors of the American Technion Society's Silicon Valley and San Francisco chapters and the Capital Campaign Committee of the Agricultural Institute of Marin, and is a founding faculty member and member of the advisory board of the Food Business School at the Culinary Institute of America (Napa Valley).

Q: What skill was most important for you in becoming a rainmaker?

A: Being a connector. Building an active pipeline of legal work is about building a sandbox that others want to play in with you. That involves building a community of referral sources and satisfied clients who value your business network and strategic thinking as much as your technical legal expertise. That community has to be organized and managed for the benefit of all who are in it. The development and leadership of that community is a continuous process.

Q: How do you prepare a pitch for a potential new client?

A: Developing new client relationships is long-term agriculture. The garden has to be seeded and cultivated well before there is a need to harvest it. When I meet with new client prospects, I ask them to

describe the most pressing problems they have on their desk that day. I brainstorm with them about how to solve those problems, and then circle back to them later with specific suggested solutions. I also introduce them to other people who can help them solve those problems. Before they even consider my legal expertise, I want them to view me as a potential strategic advisor and business resource center. When the need arises for transactional legal services, they already know how I can help, and that I am committed to their success. I don't turn on the meter until they are clear about that.

Q: Share an example of a time when landing a client was especially difficult, and how you handled it.

A: Patience can be required, particularly when prospective clients want to negotiate complex alternative billing arrangements. That process can involve multiple approvals from within the firm, and multiple iterations of proposals back and forth with the prospective client. My preference is to work with clients who already understand our work ethic and the value we deliver. Sometimes that is an education process that has to be condensed into a short time frame, in order to successfully compete against other law firms that are also being considered for a potential transaction.

Q: What should aspiring rainmakers focus on when beginning their law careers?

A: Young business lawyers should join nonprofit boards and take active roles on working board committees. This allows them to demonstrate to fellow board members that they are industrious and effective problem-solvers. They can build their network by displaying these skills in nonlegal capacities long before they even begin to think about asking for legal work.

The first thing I encourage new associates to do is to read Adam Grant's "Give and Take." Grant, a Wharton School organizational psychologist, divides the business world into three categories: "takers," "matchers," and "givers." His thesis is that "givers" always trump "takers" and "matchers" (who overtly seek something in return for any favor or assistance) in modern entrepreneur-driven industry sectors. That view reflects a business philosophy that informs every aspect of my client development efforts. I always give before I ask.

For example, I host a weekly lunch meeting in my office for small subgroups of the 70 to 80 professionals to whom I refer clients, and who refer clients to me. They are my informal "keiretsu" of service providers who all know me but frequently don't know each other. By mixing and matching them in small groups in my office every week, they get to know each other and in the process have the opportunity to expand their own referral networks. They benefit directly from these introductions, which serve as a "give" with no quid pro quo or "ask". The indirect benefit to me is that without even mentioning it, these meetings provide a frequent reminder to the participants that I can help them assemble and lead a well-coordinated team of seasoned professional service providers for major M&A transactions.

Q: What's the most challenging aspect of remaining a rainmaker?

A: The time commitment. It requires rigorous discipline. I spend up to three hours every day at it. It's roughly one-third of my daily professional life. Without that continuous effort the pipeline will falter. Maintaining that effort at a high pitch on a sustained basis can be a challenge. You have to like people, be curious about what they do and what business challenges and opportunities are on the horizon for them, and genuinely want to help them grow their businesses, to succeed at this work. It can't just be about generating more billable hours.

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