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## Training For Rain

Some Firms Turn to Outside Companies for In-House Business Development

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By Andy Grieser

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In the late 1990s, Kerry Smith was an associate at the right place at the right time.

The Internet boom was driving so much work to his large Silicon Valley law firm that, he says, rainmaking was actually discouraged, and he easily made partner without having his own client base.

Then the venture-capital bubble burst. By 2002, Smith found himself with a new firm in East Palo Alto and searching for new business--with no idea how to go about it. "I had to do something," Smith recalls. So that year he turned to Los Angeles based Unfair Advantage to hone his client acquisition and business development skills.

Rainmaking is the lifeblood of law firms, and the how to's of honing this crucial skill make for hot topics at conferences and seminars. For this reason, it's not uncommon for law firms to teach business development techniques to their own lawyers, tapping successful partners to tell their secrets. Some firms, though, instead choose to call in outside experts.

Companies like Unfair Advantage employ former sales executives and former law firm partners to teach skills such as attracting new business, strengthening existing relationships, effective cross selling and creating new sources of revenue. Often, the goal is to train a core group of partners over a short period of time with the expectation that they will help guide others in the firm. Common programming approaches include one on one sessions, role playing exercises and group meetings.

### Interactive Instruction

It was a hands on, interactive approach that sold Philadelphia based Drinker Biddle & Reath on business development instruction by the WJF Institute of Austin, Texas, says the law firm's chief marketing officer, Stephen Barrett. He feels this style is superior to workbook intensive instruction he's seen at firms that do their own training.

Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney in Pittsburgh is also a devotee of the WJF Institute, says Thomas VanKirk, the law firm's chief executive officer. VanKirk hired the company at the end of 2003, and since then more than 80 of the firm's partners have participated in the company's program, which included exercises in which partners team up to sell a mock client on the firm's services. As a result, VanKirk says, he's seen a new emphasis on teamwork--a focus of programs at both the WJF Institute and Unfair Advantage--along with an appreciable rise in both morale and cross selling success.

Yet the general nature of the programming can be an issue, says CMO Mark L. Thompson of Chicago based Seyfarth Shaw. Thompson, a lawyer, founded the firm's in house business development coaching program last year. "The best coaching comes in specific opportunities, not in the abstract," he says. "Every presentation is different, and [an outside company] can only tell you so much unless they're brought in to help you go out after a specific piece of business where they know your issues and the personalities of the people in the room."

Outside instruction is not inexpensive. Unfair Advantage's 12-week clinics cost \$2,500 per attendee per month. The clinics are split into weekly 45-minute one-on-one sessions and twice-a-week group sessions that last between an hour and 90 minutes. While Unfair Advantage sends regionally based professionals, the WJF Institute sends instructors from its Austin home base, which adds travel expenses to its general price tag of \$36,000 for almost 15 hours of training over three days.

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But the high short-term costs can pay off, according to Unfair Advantage CEO Marc Savas. He says his clients report originations rising 15 percent to 20 percent after a program; VanKirk says Buchanan Ingersoll experienced a 10 percent jump in new business.

Ultimately, success depends on whether lawyers are willing to apply what they've learned. "There's no magic pill; there's no shortcut," says Smith. "It's going to be work, but it does pay off."

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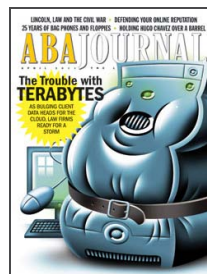
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