Four stages to better quality leads

A practical guide for owners of consultancies, agencies and specialist advisory firms who are excellent at the work and tired of the feast and famine cycle.

Most owners of expertise-led firms did not set out to be good at sales. You grew on referrals, reputation and relationships, and for a while that was enough. Then the growth flattened at the edge of your personal network, the quiet months arrived without warning, and the leads that did come in were a mix of the promising, the poorly matched and the merely flattering.

The instinct at that point is to do more. More posting, more networking, more outreach. It rarely works, because the problem is not effort. Quality of leads is decided upstream of any activity, by four things you either do deliberately or leave to chance.

This guide sets out those four stages, the questions to ask yourself at each one, and how to tell which of them is actually costing you.

STAGE ONE

Strategic Targeting: decide who you are for

A lead is only high quality relative to somebody. The same enquiry that would waste six weeks of one firm's time is the ideal client for another. So the first question is not how to get more leads, it is which leads you want.

Most expertise-led firms describe their market far too broadly, usually out of a fear of turning work away. The effect is the opposite of the one intended. A broad description makes your marketing generic, your referral network vague about who to send you, and your own judgement about which conversations to pursue much weaker than it should be.

Useful targeting is specific on three counts: the kind of organisation, the situation they are in when they need you, and the person inside it who feels the problem. The situation matters most and is the one most often missed. Firms buy expertise at moments, not in general.

Ask yourself

- Which three clients of the last two years would I happily take ten more of, and what did they have in common at the moment they came to me?

- What was happening in their business in the month before they called?
- Who could describe what I do, accurately, without me in the room?

STAGE TWO

Attract: be visible before you need anything

Once you know who you are for, the job is to be known by them before they need you. This is where most firms either do nothing or do the wrong thing energetically.

Buyers of expertise cannot judge quality in advance. They cannot inspect your thinking the way they could inspect a product, so they look for evidence that you understand their situation better than the alternatives. That evidence is your visible thinking: what you write, what you say, the questions you ask in public. Not volume, and not promotion.

The practical test is simple. Would a good prospect who read one thing you published this month be able to tell that you have seen their problem many times before? If the honest answer is no, more posting will not help.

> Visibility built only when you need work reads as need. Visibility built steadily, when you do not need anything, reads as authority. The difference is timing, and timing cannot be bought back later.

Ask yourself

- If a target client searched for the problem I solve, would they find any evidence that I understand it?
- What do I know from thirty client engagements that they cannot get anywhere else?
- Am I publishing to be seen, or to be useful to a specific person?

STAGE THREE

Qualification: tell a real opportunity from a flattering conversation

This is the stage that changes lead quality fastest, and the one owners most resist, because qualifying properly means disqualifying, and disqualifying feels like losing.

It is not. An unqualified opportunity does not sit still. It consumes proposal time, occupies your pipeline as a false comfort, and delays the harder work of finding a real one. The cost of a bad lead is not zero, it is everything you did not do instead.

Qualification is a conversation, not a checklist, and it happens early. Before you write anything, you want to understand what has changed to make this a priority now, what happens if they do nothing, who else has to agree, and whether there is a budget or only an interest. Asking these plainly is not pushy. It is the behaviour of somebody who has done this before, and buyers read it that way.

The four things to establish before you write a proposal

1. What changed. Every real opportunity has a trigger. If nobody can name it, you are talking to curiosity.
2. The cost of inaction. If doing nothing is comfortable, nothing is what will happen.
3. Who decides. Not who you are speaking to, who signs and who can quietly veto.
4. Whether money exists. Not the number, just whether a budget is real or notional.

STAGE FOUR

Nurturing: stay useful across a long buying cycle

Buying cycles for expertise run from six to eighteen months. Most firms treat a good conversation that does not convert within a month as a loss, and stop. The opportunity does not disappear, it simply matures somewhere you are no longer present.

Nurturing is not a newsletter and it is not chasing. It is a deliberate rhythm of being useful to people who are not ready yet, so that when the trigger arrives you are the person they think of. In practice that is a short list, a sensible interval, and something worth sending: a piece of thinking, an introduction, an observation about their market.

The firms that do this well have far fewer conversations and win far more of them, because they arrive at the right moment rather than a random one.

Ask yourself

- Who did I speak to last year who was right but not ready, and when did I last make contact?
- Do I have a list, or a memory?

- What could I send that would be genuinely useful to someone not currently buying?

HOW THEY FIT TOGETHER

The stages are a chain

These four are the front half of an eight stage system, and like any chain they fail at the weakest link. A firm brilliant at attraction but poor at qualification fills a pipeline that then leaks. A firm that qualifies rigorously but targets vaguely disqualifies almost everybody and concludes the market is difficult. Working harder at a strong stage will not fix a weak one.

So the useful question is not which of these should I do, it is which one is my constraint. That is usually visible in the numbers you already have.

> If you have too few conversations, look at targeting and attract. If you have plenty of conversations and few proposals, look at qualification. If you have proposals that go quiet, look at qualification again, then nurturing. If good prospects reappear months later having bought from somebody else, nurturing is your constraint.

EXERCISE

A one hour audit

Take the last ten opportunities that reached a proposal or a serious conversation. Write them down and answer three questions honestly. An hour spent here will tell you more than a quarter of extra activity.

Which of the ten came from a deliberate action of mine, and which arrived by chance?

At which stage did the ones that failed actually fail?

What would have had to be true, three months earlier, for the best of them to have arrived sooner?

WHAT TO DO NEXT

Find your constraint

If the audit points clearly at one stage, start there and leave the others alone for now. If it does not, the free fifteen minute self-assessment on my website scores you across all eight stages and shows you where the biggest return sits.

If you would rather talk it through, book a Discovery Call. It is 45 to 60 minutes about your business, at the end of which we each decide whether working together makes sense. No pitch, no pressure, no obligation, and if I am not the right person I will say so.

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