Setting Revenue Goals That Actually Change Behaviour

From "more clients" to numbers you'd stand behind

Most owners of consultancies, agencies and advisory firms have goals like "grow the business", "win more clients", or "get to £2M eventually". These are hopes wearing goal costumes, and there's a simple test that exposes them: did the goal change what you did this Monday? If your week looks identical with or without it, you don't have a goal. You have a wish. The difference isn't motivation, and it isn't ambition. It's construction, and construction can be learned.

This guide walks you through building a revenue goal properly, in four stages: what you actually want, where you honestly are, which levers could close the gap, and what you'll do about it this week. If the structure feels like being well coached, that's because it is: it follows the GROW framework from the coaching tradition I trained in, applied to the specific arithmetic of firms that sell expertise. Work through it with a pen. It takes about forty minutes, and it's the same thinking my client engagements are built on.

Goal: what do you actually want?

Start by writing down the goal you already have, however vague. Now let's rebuild it, because a revenue goal that changes behaviour has three layers, and most owners only ever set the top one.

Outcome goals are the top layer: revenue, profit, client count. You need one for direction. But here's what most goal-setting guides won't tell you: you cannot directly control an outcome. In expertise markets, where buying cycles run six to eighteen months, this quarter's revenue was substantially decided last year. An outcome goal on its own produces anxiety in quiet months, complacency in good ones, and changes nothing in between.

System measures are the middle layer: the health of the machine that produces the outcome. Qualified opportunities in your pipeline. The share of proposals you win. How long clients stay. How often referrals arrive. These respond to effort within weeks rather than quarters, and they're where a revenue goal starts becoming something you can actually work on.

Activity measures are the bottom layer: what you will actually do this week. Conversations held. Referral asks made. Client reviews booked. They are fully within your control, and they're the only layer where a goal can literally change a Monday.

The rule that binds the layers: every outcome goal must be translated downwards until it reaches something you control this week. "£1.5M" isn't a goal until it has become, say, "two referral conversations a month and no proposal without a proper qualification conversation first".

A word about SMART goals, since the acronym is over the door here. SMART is fine as far as it goes, but applied naively it misleads firms like yours in two ways. "Achievable" quietly teaches sandbagging: setting targets you already know you'll hit. And "Time-bound", applied to outcomes in a long-cycle market, puts deadlines on things you can't control, which is how owners come to abandon a perfectly good system in month four because a lagging number hasn't moved yet. The honest correction: outcomes get a direction and a horizon. Deadlines belong to activities and system changes, the things actually in your hands.

Write it down: your outcome goal, with a horizon. "Revenue of £____ by ____." Accept, for now, that it can't yet change your Monday.

Reality: where are you honestly starting from?

This is the stage almost every goal-setting exercise skips, and skipping it is why most goals fail. Before you can choose how to close a gap, you need to know the gap, in numbers rather than impressions. Answer these with evidence, not feel:

- Where did your last ten clients actually come from? Not where you'd like work to come from: where it came from.
- What is your average engagement worth, honestly averaged?
- Of the proposals you sent in the last year, what share did you win?
- How many genuinely qualified opportunities are in your pipeline right now?
- How many clients left you last year, and how many referred you?

If you can't answer two or more of these, that discovery is itself the most useful thing in this guide: you've been navigating without instruments, and no goal survives that. Get the numbers first; estimates from your invoicing and inbox are fine to start.

Now state the gap in arithmetic. If you're at £1.2M and want £1.5M, the gap is £300K. At an average engagement of £30K, that's ten additional engagements. At a one-in-three win rate, ten engagements means roughly thirty additional qualified opportunities, or the same opportunities converting better, or bigger engagements. Suddenly the vague ambition has a shape, and the shape tells you where to look next.

A shortcut for this whole stage: the free fifteen-minute Revenue System Self-Assessment at smarterentrepreneurs.co.uk scores your business across the eight stages of how expertise-led firms win and keep clients, and shows you where your biggest constraint sits. It is, in effect, this Reality section done systematically.

Options: which levers could close the gap?

There are only four levers, and every revenue gap closes through some mix of them: more qualified opportunities entering the pipeline; a better share of them converting; higher value per engagement; and clients staying longer and referring more. The discipline here, borrowed straight from good coaching, is to weigh all four before choosing, because owners habitually leap to the familiar lever, usually “more marketing”, rather than the one with the highest return.

Run the arithmetic on each against your Reality numbers. In the example above: thirty more qualified opportunities is a big ask of the front of the system. But lifting the win rate from one-in-three to one-in-two closes most of the same gap with no new opportunities at all, and if proposals are being written for prospects who were never going to buy, that lever is cheap to pull. Raising average engagement value by £5K closes a fifth of the gap on its own. And if two referrals arrived last year unprompted, a deliberate referral system that produces six is hardly fanciful. The right lever is rarely the loudest one; it’s the one your own numbers point at.

Write it down: the one lever, at most two, that your numbers say to pull first, and what they'd need to move to.

Way forward: what changes on Monday?

Now the goal finally reaches ground level. Translate your chosen lever into at most three measures: one system measure that tells you the lever is moving, and one or two activity measures fully within your control. Three is a ceiling, not a target; a goal you won’t track is a wish with paperwork, and nobody reliably tracks five things.

Then answer the commitment questions, in writing, because they're where intention becomes plan: What exactly will you do, and by when? What is most likely to get in the way, and what will you do about that? Who will know you've committed to this? And how will you know it’s working?

Finally, set the review rhythm: measures glanced at weekly, the goal itself reviewed properly every quarter. A way forward without a review date quietly becomes last year’s plan. And when you review, be honest in both directions: change the approach if the numbers say so, and give system changes the months they genuinely take before declaring them failed. In a long-cycle market, the most common goal-setting error isn't aiming wrong. It's quitting a working system because the lagging number hadn't caught up yet.

One last piece of honesty, because it runs through everything I publish: a goal is a hypothesis about what effort produces, not a promise. Nobody can guarantee you revenue, and you should be wary of anyone who does. What proper construction gives you is something better than a promise: a goal that tells you what to do on Monday, numbers that tell you whether it's working, and the standing to change course on evidence rather than mood.

Where to go from here

If you skipped the shortcut earlier, the free Revenue System Self-Assessment at smarterentrepreneurs.co.uk will show you which stage of your revenue system your measures should watch first; the other free tools on the same page, the Qualification Scorecard, the Referral Engine Guide and the 90-Day Revenue Foundations Plan, are each aimed at a specific lever. And if you'd like a second pair of eyes on your numbers and the goal you've just built, that's exactly what a Discovery Call is for. No pitch, no pressure, and you'll leave with something useful either way.