

Learning from Rainmakers

A transcript of an interview of Doug Fletcher, co-author of *How Clients Buy: A Practical Guide to Business Development for Consulting and Professional Services*.



Introduction

Don't call it selling. Do great work. Build relationships. Wear the style that fits. Stay persistent.

In this eighth of a series of interviews, Andi Baldwin of Profitable Ideas Exchange asked *How Clients Buy* co-author Doug Fletcher about the themes that emerged from interviews of dozens of rainmakers at consulting and professional services firms large and small.

For much of my career, I misunderstood business development. I believe I thought that there was a sales "type". I find it reassuring to know that isn't the case. Each of us is responsible for business development, and each of us must find the style that suits our clients and us.

I'm an introvert. However, I've developed a reputation of being connected. While I tend to avoid stereotypical networking events, I embrace the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with interesting people. I view it as cultivating serendipity. I've found that it works for me.

What works for you?

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a trailing flourish.

Dave Bayless, Co-founder of Human Scale Business

About the Authors

Tom McMakin and Doug Fletcher are practicing consultants who live the challenges addressed in their book.



Tom is CEO of Profitable Ideas Exchange (PIE), a leading provider of business development services for consulting and professional services firms. Previously, he held leadership positions in private equity and served as the chief operating officer of Great Harvest Bread Co, a multi-unit operator of bread stores. Tom is the author of *Bread and Butter*, a critically-acclaimed book that describes his work at Great Harvest and how he and his team created a nationally recognized corporate learning community and culture of best practices using collaborative networks. He has appeared on the pages of *Fast Company*, *Inc Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, and *The Wall Street Journal* and speaks widely. He is a graduate of Oberlin College and former Peace Corps Volunteer in Cameroon.



Doug currently splits his time between speaking/writing/coaching on the topic of business development in consulting and professional services and teaching at the Jake Jobs College of Business & Entrepreneurship at Montana State University. He also serves on the Board of Directors of The Beacon Group, a growth strategy consulting firm headquartered in Portland, Maine. Prior to that, he was co-founder and CEO of North Star Consulting Group, a technology-enabled consulting firm that specialized in global web-survey projects. Earlier in his professional life, Doug served as a consultant with the management consultancy, A.T. Kearney, and was trained at General Electric in its leadership development program. He is a graduate of Clemson University and has an MBA from the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business Administration.

Transcript

Andi Baldwin: Doug, in the research for "How Clients Buy," you guys interviewed several dozen rainmakers from different sized firms and different industries. Why did you feel that this research was necessary?

Doug Fletcher: The main reason we wanted to do the interviews was to test the premises for our book. Primarily, that becoming a rainmaker is very important, is essential to becoming a partner in a larger firm or to be successful in a solo practitioner firm.

And then secondly, that nowhere along the way are we taught how to do this, right? So those were a couple of major theses of our books that we wanted to test with the rainmakers. And we went out to a wide range of rainmakers, almost three dozen from accounting, management consulting, law, engineering, architecture, and so forth. Big firms, small firms. We interviewed people that were senior, some people that were more junior.

And by and large, we found that we were on the right track. We were onto something that was a very interesting problem in that, yes, it is essential to become a rainmaker if you want to be successful in professional services. And two, we're never really taught how to do this. So we felt we were on the right track with the book.

Andi: So did you find that across these rainmakers that you spoke to that they had a common approach to business development?

Doug: Yeah, it's funny you bring that up, because yes. There were some themes. We didn't anticipate that, necessarily. You know, as with any research project, oftentimes you begin the endeavor really not necessarily knowing where it's going to lead you.

But when Tom and I would meet to discuss how the interviews were going, what we were learning, these consistent themes started to emerge. And we started to keep a journal about what these themes were, and we started to call them our rainmaker themes.

And while it wasn't originally planned to be this way, it became a chapter in the book. And it's called "How to Act and Think Like a Rainmaker." It's one of the final chapters in the book. And frankly, it's one of my favorite chapters of the book.

Andi: What else did you learn from these conversations with the rainmakers?

Doug: So after conducting, you know, almost three dozen interviews from this wide variety of people, Tom and I boiled down all of that research into about a half dozen core themes. And I'll just give you an example of a couple of those key rainmaker themes.

The first one is do great work. It's important enough not to overlook that in this book about how to sell professional services, the number one thing that these successful rainmakers said is at the end of the day, doing great work is the best thing you can do to win new business, right? Because it builds your professional reputation, your professional credibility. And so that was a consistent theme. And I think that's important for young professionals to hear.

Another important theme was develop your own style, meaning specifically develop your own rainmaker style. Because we're really never taught how to do this, I think oftentimes when we're earlier in our career, we try to emulate or copy someone that is successful. Andi's super successful. I want to be like her.

And you know, the thing that came through loud and clear from our research is that there is no one way to be successful, and you shouldn't try to copy someone else's approach. And there's enough latitude to be yourself and develop an approach that you feel comfortable with and plays to your strengths. And I really liked that theme, and I think that's also really important to hear early in your career.

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