

Effective BD Meetings

How to excel at sales meetings
with new and existing clients





Initial meetings with potential clients or with new people at existing clients are critical opportunities and can be the difference between years of work and no work at all.

In this guide we will provide you with everything you need to know to maximize the impact of those opening business development conversations, including:

- The importance of preparation
- First impression dos and don'ts
- Structuring the time to ensure the greatest impact
- How to differentiate yourself and your organisation
- How to really motivate the client to want to work with you

This guide is the first step on the path to developing your role as a trusted adviser.

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STAGE 1

Planning and preparation

Do your research

- What do you know about the client organisation and the person or people you are going to meet?
- Do some background research using their website, LinkedIn, and search engines.
- What are the hot topics and key issues in their industry at the moment?
- Plan your positioning statement – there will be more on this later.

Make contact

It's always a good idea to send a short note in advance of the meeting to cover off things like:

- Where and when the meeting is taking place
- Who you intend to bring (and why). You might also ask who will be there from their side. See below for more advice on thinking about attendees
- Outline the areas for discussion – not a formal agenda, but what you intend to cover based on initial conversations
- Ask them if there are any specific areas they would like to cover – and make sure you include those in your meeting plan

If you have some content such as an article, slide deck or research paper that would be relevant to them, send it in advance of the meeting, and explain why you think it might be useful. This demonstrates to the client that you are tuned in to their business and the potential challenges they may be facing. →

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Think about attendees

It's important to give some thought to who will be going to the meeting. Here are some tips:

Broadly match numbers. For example, if you are meeting two people, send two or three people, not five.

Meetings are much easier with a colleague. It is difficult to conduct a business development meeting on your own, given that you will need to ask questions, actively listen and also take notes.

Consider the type of people you are meeting, and try to reflect the dynamic when it comes to age, seniority and gender.

First impressions

You can begin making the right impression from the moment you step over the threshold of the client's building. Firstly, treat everyone you meet from the organisation as you would treat the client themselves – you never know who is influential! Read on for more on how to make the best of those first few minutes:

Don't be late!

Always arrive a little earlier than the start time – this way you won't be flustered and the client won't be distracted by you being late.

Introducing yourself

A receptionist's life is usually a hectic one, so go out of your way to make their life easy. Introduce yourself and

say your name clearly. You might want to present your business card so there is no misunderstanding. Explain who you are there to see.

Coffee?

If you are offered coffee at this point, politely refuse – it just gets in the way and you will probably get another chance once the meeting begins when you can join your host in a drink.

Reception research

Reception areas are often full of client information. If you have time, take a look at any press clippings, annual statements, or in-house magazines – there might be some interesting things in there you can use in the meeting!



Chat checklist

The most common topics of discussion at this point (in British culture at least) are weather and transport. Time to break the norm!

- Be ready with one or two more interesting conversation topics – potentially things you found out while waiting in reception.
- Positive comments about the environment you're in and the greeting you received when you arrived show that you are attentive and appreciative...two good human qualities.
- Make a link to how the meeting came about – perhaps you met at an event, or someone referred you.
- When you're ready to turn the discussion to business, say, "Before we get onto the agenda, can I just check how you are for time?"

Handshake

Your host will usually come to meet you from reception. Confident body language is key at this stage. Greet them warmly with a good firm handshake and look them in the eye* when you introduce yourself.

Establish a rapport

Begin the conversation light heartedly to establish a connection on a personal level. Just don't overdo it or be overly friendly before the relationship has even had a chance to develop.

*be aware - this is not the case in all cultures

STAGE 2

The meeting

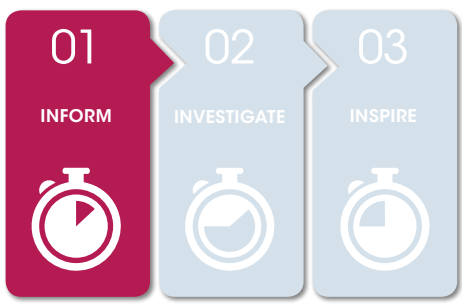
It is essential that you always plan the structure of any business development meeting. While you may need to be flexible on the day (you can never fully control how a meeting will go) preparing a basic structure ensures that you and the client will get the most out of the meeting and that a next step or action is secured.



The questas 3i model INFORM, INVESTIGATE, INSPIRE

The 3i model is a simple but effective framework to plan and execute your early business development meetings with clients and prospects. The tool takes you through three stages:





INFORM

Introductions

At the beginning of the meeting, introduce yourself and have your colleagues do the same. It is important that everyone who is at the meeting says something in the first few minutes.

Timing

If you haven't already done this, check the timing with the client - for example, "We have an hour in the diary, is that still good for you?"

Signposting

Explain how you intend to run the meeting and how you will use the time. You could say: "Can I suggest we start by giving you a brief overview of who we are, and then we would like to learn about you and your business, including any challenges you are currently facing. This will allow us to respond to your situation and demonstrate how we would be able to help. How does that sound?" The client will almost always say, "That sounds good to me", giving you a green light to proceed. Time to provide a brief introduction to your business - your positioning statement.

Positioning

Your positioning statement is an extended introduction to you and your organization. It is not designed to be a 'pitch' but more to ensure the client really understands what your business does, your role and importantly, how you help clients like them. If your positioning statement is good your client will already be



hooked by the time you've finished and ready and willing to engage in the remainder of the meeting!

There are three distinct elements to a positioning statement:

- An overview of your business - where you operate, numbers of people, industry sectors and if appropriate some examples of projects.
- Specific details about your area of the business, for example, the types of clients and projects your department has worked on.
- Areas of interest for you personally - what have you been involved in? How have you helped clients?

At the end of your positioning statement don't fall into the trap of asking, "Is there anything else you would like to know about us?" The danger of this is that you spend too long talking about you when we really need to be talking about them and their organisation.

The best way to end the Inform stage of the 3i model and move into the Investigate stage is to say, "Hopefully that gives you a good understanding of us, the kind of work we do and the kind people we work for...now can I ask you..." At this point you can move into the Investigate stage and your first question.

Rules for a strong positioning statement

- 1 **Keep it short** - 90 seconds is about the maximum length
- 2 **Keep it snappy** - don't use more words than you need to, but don't make it just a list
- 3 **Inject enthusiasm and passion**
- 4 **Reference some of your skills** and ways you have helped other clients solve problems



INVESTIGATE

This is by far the most important part of your early business development meetings and the one most often neglected.

Many professionals in business development roles feel they need to be the one talking during the meeting, telling the client how they can help them before they have investigated what is actually important to them.

This is where the majority of your time should be spent in early BD meetings, where you build on your understanding of the client and their business: their needs, issues and challenges, drivers, short and long term goals, and strategies.

Ask questions

Prepare one or two questions based on your research in advance of the meeting.

They should be thought-provoking, getting the client to think about something that perhaps they have not thought about before or getting them to think differently about something they are grappling with.

Your questions should also demonstrate your knowledge of some of the issues the client is likely to be facing, and your experience at handling similar challenges.

The right questions are conversation openers and can allow you to understand what's uppermost in the mind of your client.



The right questions are conversation openers

- Ask broad, open questions – those that start with words like What, Who, How, Why, When, Describe..., Tell me...
- When the client responds it is important to really listen to the answer, then investigate deeper by asking more specific open questions, like, “You mentioned challenges in the business, and I wondered what specific challenges you mean?”
- Closed questions used sparingly still have a place in the Investigate stage, to check whether your understanding is correct. For example: “So am I right in thinking your biggest challenge currently is the staff resourcing issue?” →

Question time

Thought-provoking questions are made up of three elements:

1 A statement of fact or an industry wide issue – something relevant to the client

2 Your experiences in dealing with this issue

3 An open question, such as, “How are you dealing with this issue?”



The key to good communication is actively listening

← **Listening**

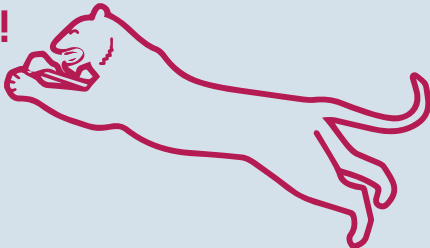
Good questioning is only one part of a good investigation; the other thing we need to be really good at is listening.

- Being the best listener your prospective client has ever had in front of them is a great objective.
- Too often we forget that good selling is simply about good communication and the key to this is actively listening.
- When we ask great thought provoking questions we must give the respondent time and space to answer. Sometimes, when there is a period of silence there is a danger we dive into the 'silent pool' when we should just stay quiet and wait for them to speak, it is after all their turn!

Body language

- Good eye contact without staring!
- Lean in to the conversation
- Remain 'open' by not folding your arms
- Nod and use facial expression to show you are tuned in

Beware the pounce!

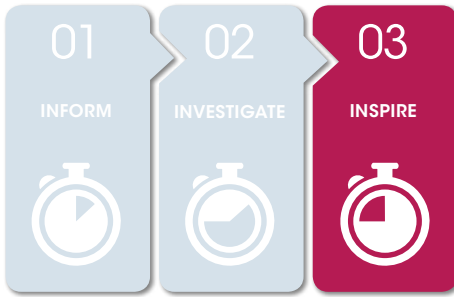


Quite often in a business development discussion with a client, they might say something along the lines of "our real problem is..." or "my biggest challenge at the moment is..."

On one hand this is great news but we need to avoid the temptation to pounce on it and go into full-on selling mode.

The danger of this is:

- a) we may not fully understand
- b) we might make assumptions that mean we get it wrong; and
- c) even if we're right we might get stuck on this one thing and run out of time to explore other areas.



INSPIRE

Throughout the Investigate section of the meeting, make notes of the key issues and identify the really burning challenges. Then summarise what you have heard. If the client agrees that you have captured their key issues, you have the green light to proceed to the Inspire stage.

How you can help

Having summarised the key issues, now you need to use your skills and experience to identify where you may be able to help the client.

This is where it is important to have a broad knowledge of the 'tools' in your company's 'toolkit'!

- Talk about how you can assist with the issues and challenges. This may include bringing back an expert to see them or reflecting on the conversation and reverting back later with some ideas.
- Suggest the next steps or ask the client how they would like to proceed, whichever is most appropriate.
- Summarise what has been agreed and secure their commitment to the next step.

Patience and trust

You are not necessarily looking to secure the sale or business here and now. The goal is to inspire the client, demonstrate your credibility and secure a commitment to a next step.

- At the first meeting it is very unlikely that you will make a sale.



Identify where you may be able to help the client

Any one of the outcomes above must be seen as a good result to an initial meeting.

- You are trying to build a relationship so it is normal for you to have a number of meetings, potentially with different stakeholders, in order to secure the project.
- If you push too hard for work before the client is ready to commit

you are in danger of losing the 'consultative' style that you have built through the meeting and coming across as simply chasing the fee.

- Selling professional services is heavily reliant on trust. To engage you as a trusted adviser, the client needs to know that you have their interests at heart and that buying you is a risk-free option.

STAGE 3

Follow up

After a meeting of this nature always follow up with something that:

- Demonstrates that you have listened to them
- Adds some value to their world

For example, you might have been talking about a specific challenge the client is facing and you can follow up

with a paper, piece of research, or link to an interesting website or seminar.

Whatever you send when following up a meeting, ensure to follow the golden rules. It has to be:

- Relevant**
- Useful**
- Interesting**

It is better to follow up with this kind of thing than to leave it behind at the meeting - it keeps you front of mind and demonstrates that you understand them.

This targeted attention to detail will demonstrate your credibility and reinforce your potential to become a trusted adviser.



Summary

Planning is essential to be well informed, however, you don't need to know everything – you genuinely want to explore their world without looking naïve.

First impressions can be very hard to recover from if they are negative, so don't let that happen!

Rapport building makes things much more relaxed from the outset, it removes barriers and allows for a healthy flow of dialogue.

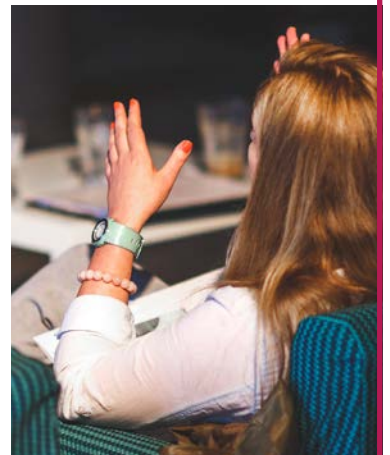
Learn and practice the **3i model**.

Open questions will illicit more information from the client. When you can use the 'three-part thought-provoking' question (page 7) you will have their utmost attention.

Beware the pounce! It will be difficult to begin with because you may well be programmed to come up with solutions to problems as they present themselves. Remember that you are far more likely to come up with a better solution and potentially a wider remit if you seek to understand the problem and its context in some detail before you suggest how you might be able to help.

A strong summary will tell the client that you have not only been listening but that you have really understood their current position, challenges and objectives.

Finally, always follow up a day or two after the meeting. Send something relevant to the conversation and ideally useful and informative to the recipient.





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