

Rainmaker Q&A: Dentons' Jessica Abrahams

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Jessica C. Abrahams is chairwoman of Dentons' U.S. government contracts practice and global public procurement practice in Washington, D.C. She has experience in a full range of contracts matters, including bid protests, civil false claims, internal investigations, fraud disclosures, compliance issues and internal controls, sustainable acquisition, cost and pricing issues, subcontracting, teaming agreements, Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, export controls, trade compliance including compliance with customs-trade partnership against terrorism (C-TPAT), suspension and debarment, terminations, trade secret issues, U.S. domestic security requirements and foreign ownership, control or influence (FOCI) issues.



Jessica C. Abrahams

Abrahams is regarded as one of the nation's leading government contracts lawyers. She represents clients in a variety of industries, including biodefense, health care, information technology, defense services, supply chain and infrastructure development. She regularly advises global government contractors, Indian nations, nonprofit organizations and small business owners on contracting best practices and risk mitigation techniques.

Abrahams often teams with lawyers in her practice to strategize for clients entering the federal marketplace, and to assist in their effort to identify and obtain meaningful business opportunities. She also partners with Dentons' corporate lawyers on a variety of transactions, particularly matters related to mergers and acquisitions and the associated due diligence.

Q: What skill was most important for you in becoming a rainmaker?

A: In order to be a rainmaker, you must understand your client's business needs and the importance of providing pragmatic legal advice, and you must not be afraid to ask for the business. Business development is about building relationships, and becoming a trusted adviser to your clients is critical to that process. You want to be more than simply a cost center — you want to add to the company's bottom line. Understanding the company's business strategy and goals is key.

Also, it is critical to be able to close. Everyone has her own style. Develop yours and do not be afraid to ask for the work.

Finally, even when the client wants to hire you, remember that you are part of a team. Showing off your team does not detract from your status, it makes you look stronger and more attractive to potential clients. Clients want to know who their relationship or responsible partner is, but they also want to

know that the firm has bench strength. Your ability to showcase your team will result in additional business because (1) more people will be immersed in the client relationship; (2) the client will appreciate that you are a team player and, thus, someone with whom they want to work; and (3) your team members will feel appreciated, will become more invested and will want to go the extra mile. You will engender confidence and loyalty on both sides, which will be invaluable later on.

Q: How do you prepare a pitch for a potential new client?

A: In preparing to pitch a new client, I try to learn everything I can about the company, its business operations, growth strategy and current issues — both company-specific problems and market-driven issues and industry trends. I also try to learn as much as possible about the individuals with whom I will be speaking, as well as those people running the company. I rely on our business development professionals and our research librarians, and also do my own research. In addition, I spend time thinking about ways that my colleagues and I can differentiate ourselves from other law firms and lawyers. I try to make a positive impression in a way that allows the decision-makers to feel comfortable and to know there is a good fit. Never underestimate the importance of being likeable — clients want to work with lawyers with whom they get along well.

Q: Share an example of a time when landing a client was especially difficult, and how you handled it.

A: Recently, I was involved in an opportunity to secure the global representation of a major international corporation for which I had done work in the United States. The company was scaling back from 70 law firms to two to handle all of its legal work globally. The process was difficult for several reasons, one of which was that a litigation matter we had handled ended unfavorably, and I was concerned as to how that would impact our chances. Additionally, because the representation was for global work, we needed to include relevant information for our regions around the world.

Finally, as we progressed through each stage of the process, it became apparent that, while the decision-makers wanted to recommend hiring us to the corporate board, we were more expensive than the competition. At every stage, a new challenge seemed to develop.

As the lead on the business capture, I tried to lead by example. Most critically, I tried to parlay the many challenges into strengths. For example, although our previous litigation had ended unfavorably, I learned a lot about the company in the process. Not only did I readily admit that I was dissatisfied with the result of the representation, but I used to my advantage the insights I had gained when being interviewed by the company's general counsel. I spoke about becoming a trusted adviser to the company, giving pragmatic legal advice and working with the company proactively to address systemic issues that stood in the way of maintaining existing work and/or securing new work. The general counsel stated that one reason we made it to the final round was the way we handled this issue, and that we were the only law firm that spoke of being a partner and trusted adviser.

With regard to the pricing issue, I knew the general counsel, the CFO and other key executives wanted to give us the work, but needed some cover with their board. Dispensing with email, I called the CFO directly and told him we wanted the representation and asked what we needed to do with regard to pricing. He appreciated the call and my direct approach, and even advised that we could be expensive, just not so much more expensive than the law firm next in line. We were able to work out the outstanding pricing issues within an hour, and I also gave a discount in an area not requested. I wanted to demonstrate to the company that we were investing in the representation and that we were in this together. This approach went a long way towards solidifying our relationship with the company.

Q: What should aspiring rainmakers focus on when beginning their law careers?

A: The most important thing to focus on when beginning one's career is doing good work and establishing a reputation as a preeminent practitioner. If you develop a strong reputation, word will spread. This is essential to developing one's own brand. Once you've developed a solid legal skill set or foundation, it becomes important to get out in the community in a targeted way. Random speaking or writing opportunities are nothing more than random acts of business development that are not likely to lead to anything. You must be strategic and map out a plan designed to best highlight your skill set to an audience of buyers of legal services. And many times, the most productive opportunities are not the most obvious; just because everyone else is doing something does not mean you should do it too. Do not be afraid to be different. The legal industry is changing rapidly. The same old, same old often no longer works. Do not be afraid to get ahead of the curve. Just be authentic.

Q: What's the most challenging aspect of remaining a rainmaker?

A: The most challenging aspect of being a rainmaker is to constantly stay fresh and continue to establish yourself as a thought leader. Reputation is one of the most important aspects of successful business development. It is critical to stay ahead of the next best thing and to keep your name out in the industry. In some respects, you are constantly reinventing yourself.

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