

Content-Fueled Business Development: How Smaller and Midsize Firms Can Compete with BigLaw

On September 17th, the Managing Partner Forum hosted its monthly webinar in the series “The Law Firm of the Future.” This webinar, titled "Content-Fueled Business Development: How Smaller and Midsize Firms Can Compete with BigLaw," explored how small and mid-sized law firms can strategically use content-driven business development, structured planning, and effective collaboration to enhance their market presence, build relationships, and measure the impact of their marketing efforts.

Panelists:

- [Michael Zukewich](#): Director of Business Development and Marketing, Howard & Howard PLLC
- [John Hellerman](#): President, Hellerman Communications LLC

Moderators:

- [John Remsen Jr](#): President of [TheRemsenGroup](#) and President & CEO of Managing Partner Forum
- [Uri Gutfreund](#): Senior Vice President and Managing Principal at [Ames & Gough](#)

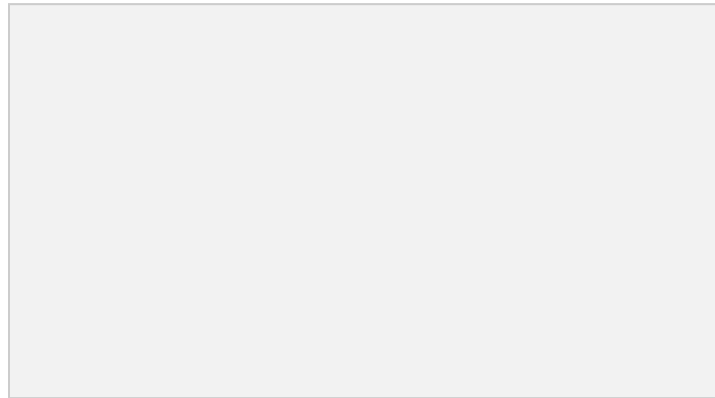
Key takeaways:

- **Importance of Business Development Plans:** Having a structured business development plan is critical for law firms, especially for smaller and mid-sized firms. These plans help align marketing and business development activities with firm goals and ensure resources are used effectively.
- **Content-Fueled Business Development:** Creating and leveraging content (such as articles, thought leadership pieces, and media appearances) is essential for credentialing lawyers, building relationships, and providing value to clients and prospects. Content should be used strategically as part of campaigns, not just as isolated efforts.
- **Measuring ROI and Efficiency:** Firms should track the effectiveness of their marketing and business development efforts, including the growth of their contact database, the number of relationships built, and the efficiency gained by leveraging non-billable time for content creation. Having clear goals and metrics is key to demonstrating value and improving future initiatives.
- **Collaboration and Personalization:** Successful business development often involves collaboration—both internally (between lawyers and marketing/BD professionals) and externally (with clients or prospects on joint content). Personalized outreach, using

content as a reason to connect, is more effective than generic follow-ups and helps deepen relationships.

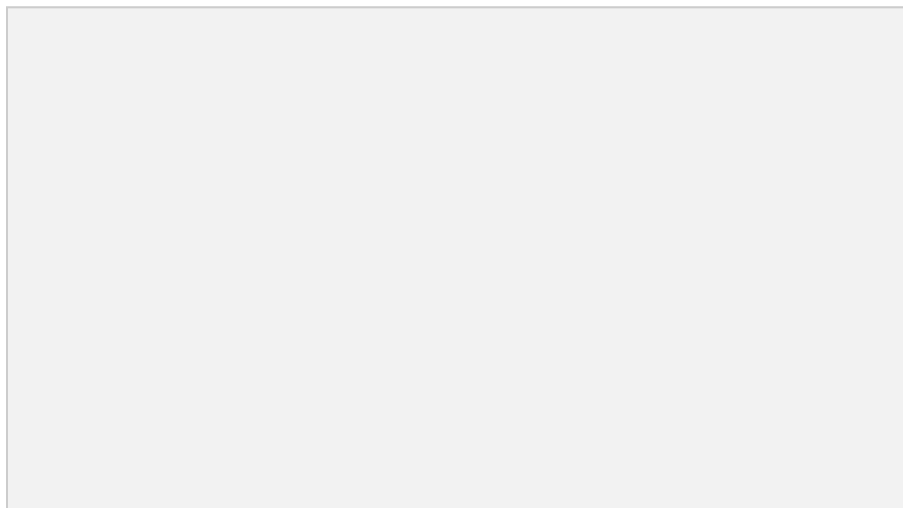
Bringing on the Data!

The panel started by reviewing fresh polling data from the MPF audience about where small and midsize firms stand on foundational elements of business development. According to the data, requiring business development plans from all lawyers across firms is still not the norm:



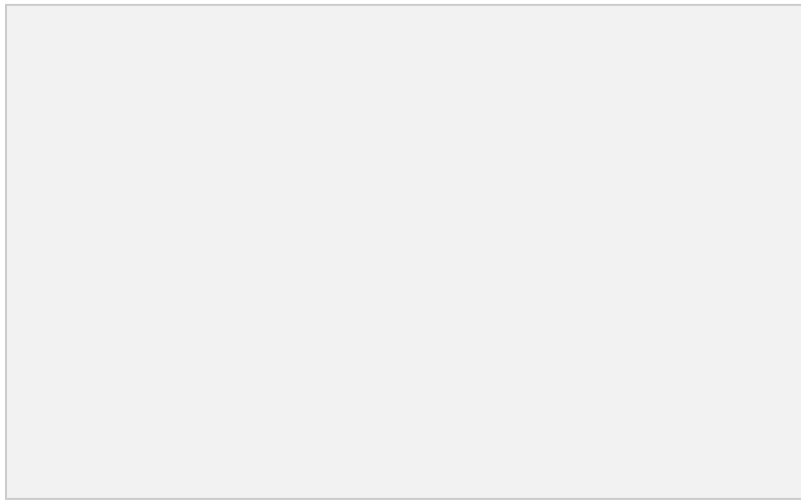
John Hellerman emphasized that having a structured plan is “critical” in his words, especially for partners expected to bring in new business. A well-formed plan should identify target prospects, messaging, channels, and conferences relevant to a lawyer’s niche. Firms risk wasting both money and momentum without that roadmap.

Michael Zukewich agreed, describing the business development plan as a necessary filter, one that connects attorney requests to firm priorities and budget constraints. At his firm, business development funds are tied to what’s in the plan. If it’s not in writing, it doesn’t get funded.



Polling data showed a nearly even split on tracking and rewarding associates for marketing and business development time. Hellerman encouraged firms to better utilize younger lawyers as “front-line doers,” especially in areas like co-authoring articles and supporting social media efforts. Their digital fluency and writing capacity can be a force multiplier when channeled effectively.

Zukewich pointed out that content strategy can be used to engage associates in real business development, especially when lawyers work directly with the marketing team on follow-ups and campaign-style outreach.

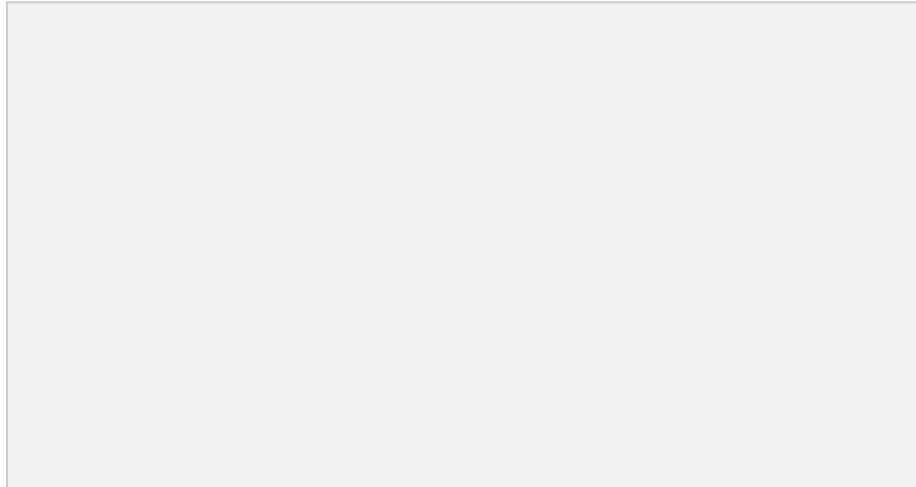


Over half of firms polled cited measuring ROI as their biggest PR challenge, so Hellerman advised firms to start simple by tracking CRM growth. A meaningful increase in qualified contacts over the year is a good indicator that marketing efforts are opening doors and building relationships.

Zukewich noted that success goes beyond events and PR placements. The real win comes when a single piece of content becomes a “campaign touchpoint,” or a catalyst for follow-up meetings, email outreach, prospect engagement, and further relationship building. In his view, effective business development doesn’t mean creating random moments of exposure, but requires deliberate execution supported by thorough planning and results tracking.

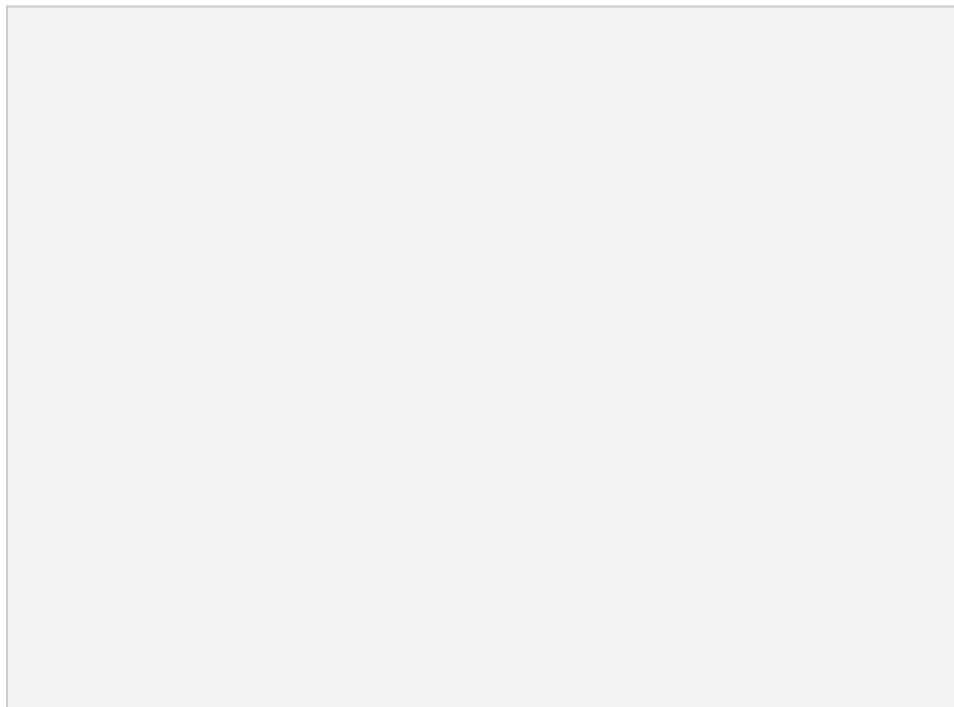
Hellerman highlighted that content is often less about being read than being seen. Just being quoted or published gives attorneys a credential to reference and a reason to reach out.

Branding and PR as Business Development Tools



As John Hellerman explained, more than a logo or tagline, a firm's brand is the sum of its lawyers' reputations in the market. He distinguished between "soft brands" (e.g., friendly, affordable, easy to work with) and "hard brands" (e.g., elite litigators, scorched-earth trial lawyers). Neither branding is inherently better, but both must be deliberate.

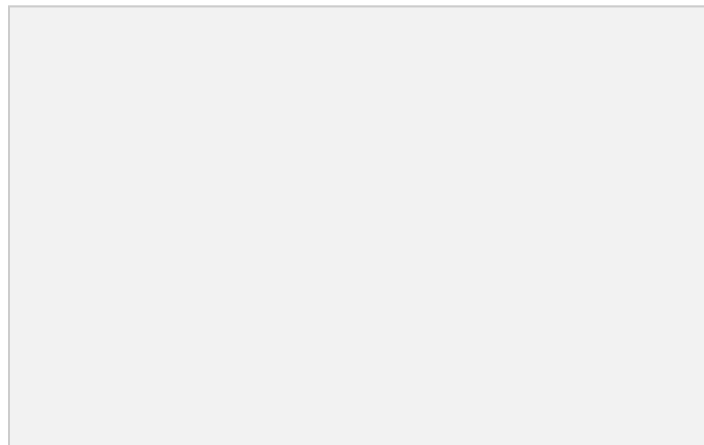
Branding allows the market to self-select. The clearer the message, the more likely it is that your firm will attract the right clients and avoid the wrong ones. "You don't want people who don't need your services to bother you," Hellerman said.



The conversation then turned to public relations and content as tools for creating and sustaining brand authority. Using Hellerman's "SMART PR" framework (Sharing Media About Relevant Topics Produces Revenue) the panel illustrated how awareness, credentialing, and relationship-building work together.

Hellerman emphasized that thought leadership is a performance indicator that helps elevate a lawyer's reputation in a given niche, more than visibility alone. Done well, it attracts more sophisticated matters and higher-quality clients. And once that work is secured, it makes the firm more attractive to top talent. "It's a cycle of growth," he explained. Better branding brings better clients, which brings better work, which brings better hires, which improves branding, and so on.

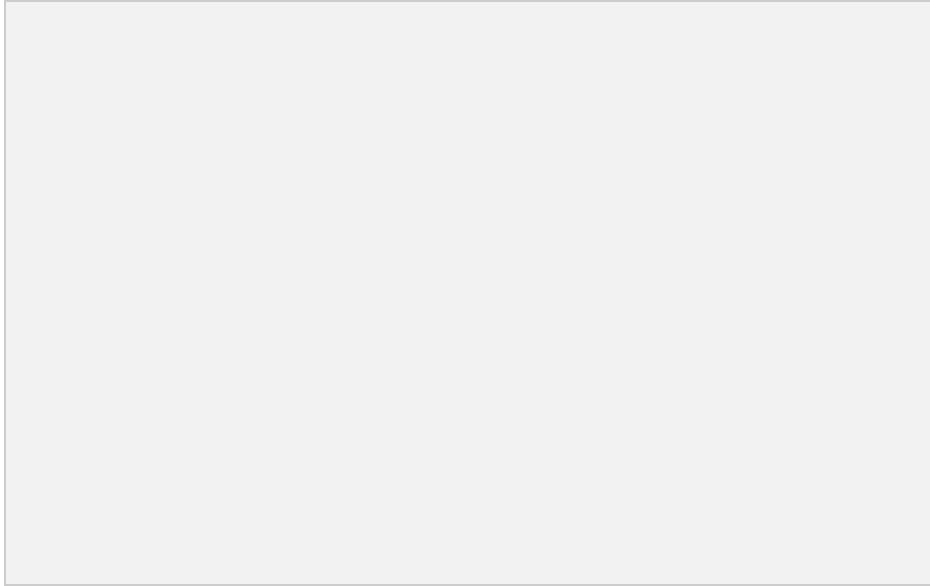
Michael Zukewich added that successful business development efforts are rarely one-size-fits-all. Effective marketers work case by case to understand the relationship dynamics and client pain points, then analyze campaign timing and pair all those insights with personalized content strategies.



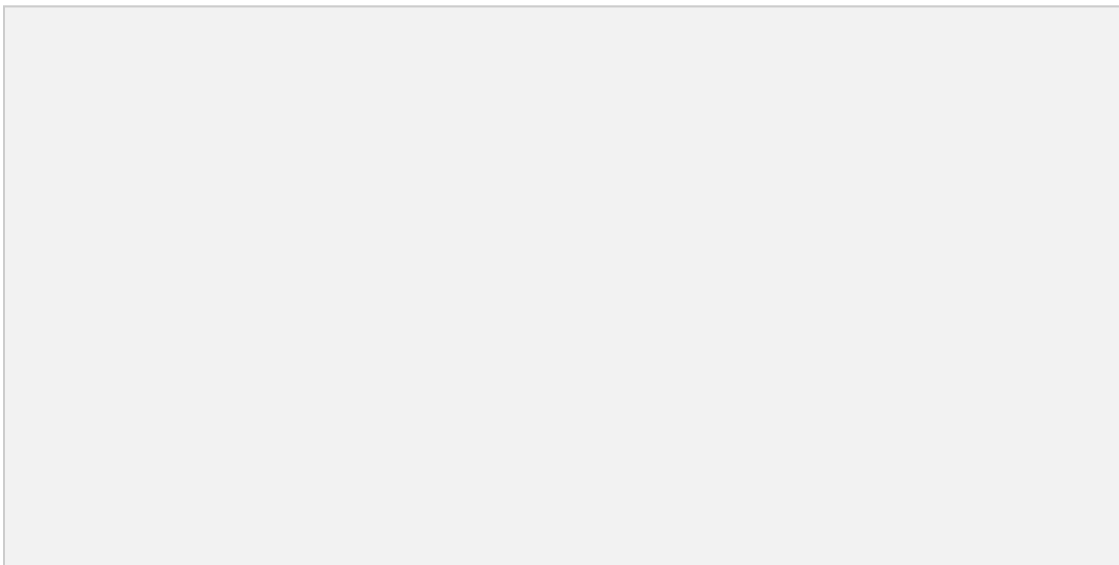
The panel agreed that PR should serve multiple business goals, seeking new clients first and foremost but also recruiting laterals and attracting high-caliber associates while protecting the firm's reputation.

Hellerman argued that firms should leverage PR and marketing to attract laterals as well as to help those lawyers integrate. When a new lateral joins your firm, you're giving them a desk, but also rebranding them. That means fresh content, firm-specific messaging, and proactive placement so that their expertise becomes part of your firm's broader narrative.

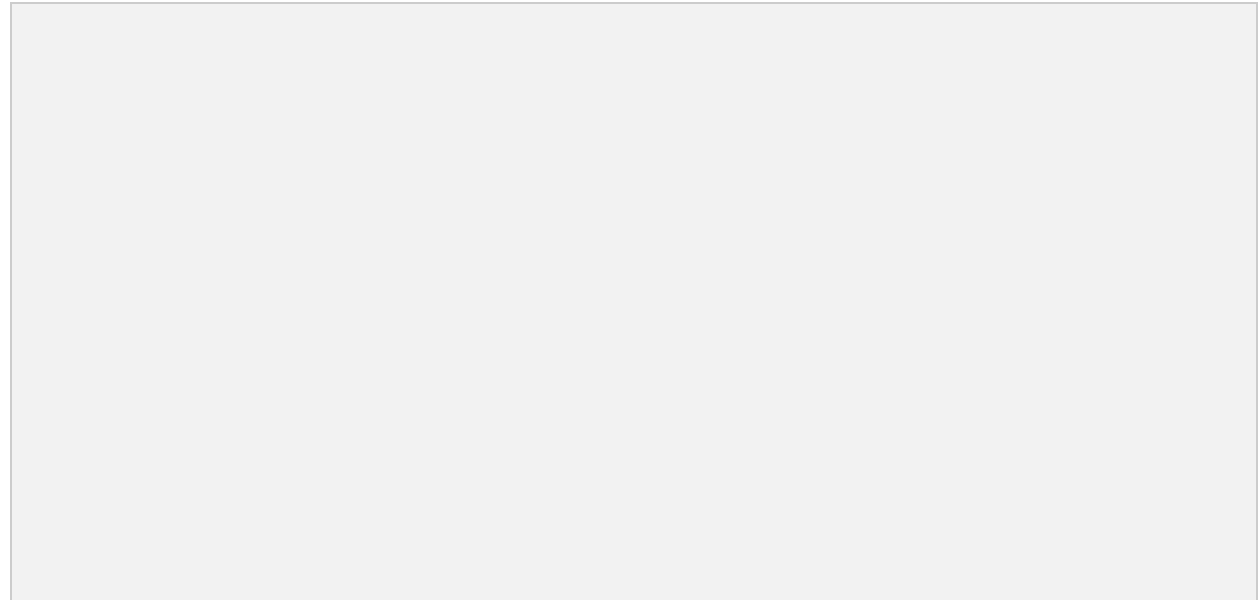
To support this strategy, panelists cited recent data from the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC), which found that four of the top six selection factors for legal services are related to reputation and expertise, not limited to just relationships.



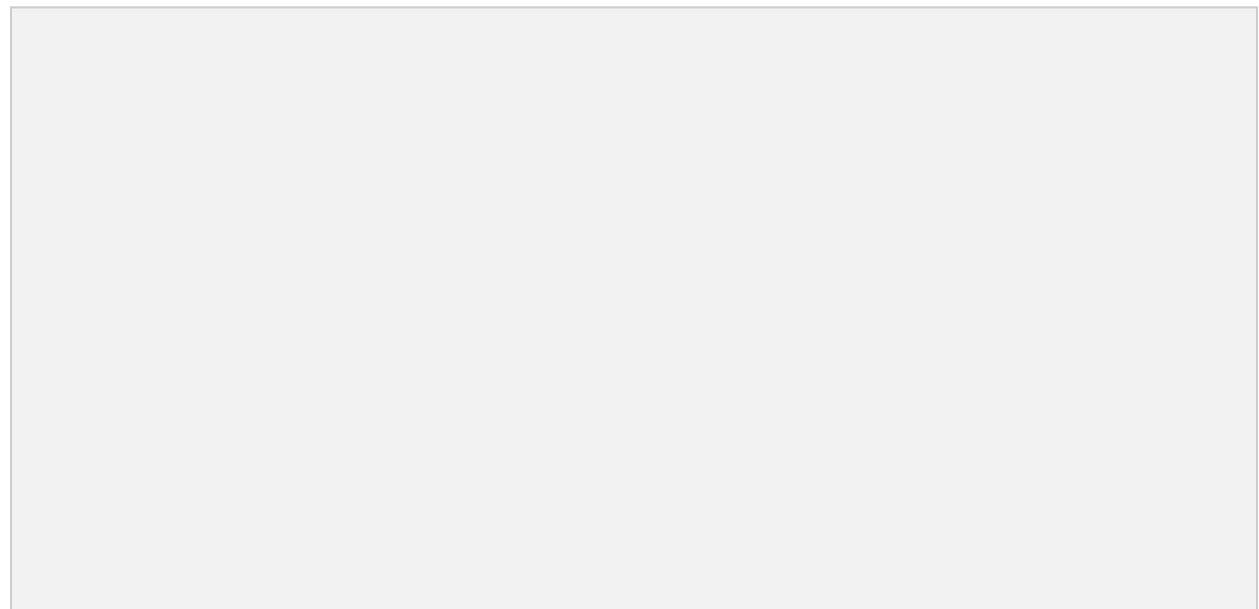
Reputation and visibility carry weight, especially for buyers who are comparing firms outside their personal network.



One point driven home throughout the discussion was that how you use PR and content matters just as much as having it. BTI Research data shared during the webinar showed that credentialing activities (e.g., being quoted as an expert, publishing in niche media) score higher than general awareness activities (e.g., social presence, casual networking) in terms of influencing hiring decisions.



Hellerman and Zukewich both urged firms to think beyond random acts of content creation. Instead, they recommended a campaign mindset, building a cluster of thought leadership materials around a narrow issue or practice strength.



“Get quoted five times on the same issue,” Hellerman advised, “not five different things.” This builds credibility and makes the expertise more memorable to the market.

Finally, panelists emphasized the need for an “after-placement plan.” Too much content is published and then forgotten about. To maximize its value, firms should have a clear plan for what happens next: reprints, email distribution, follow-up outreach, social sharing, and targeted client conversations.

In Zukewich's words, content shouldn't be a dead-end: "it should go somewhere."