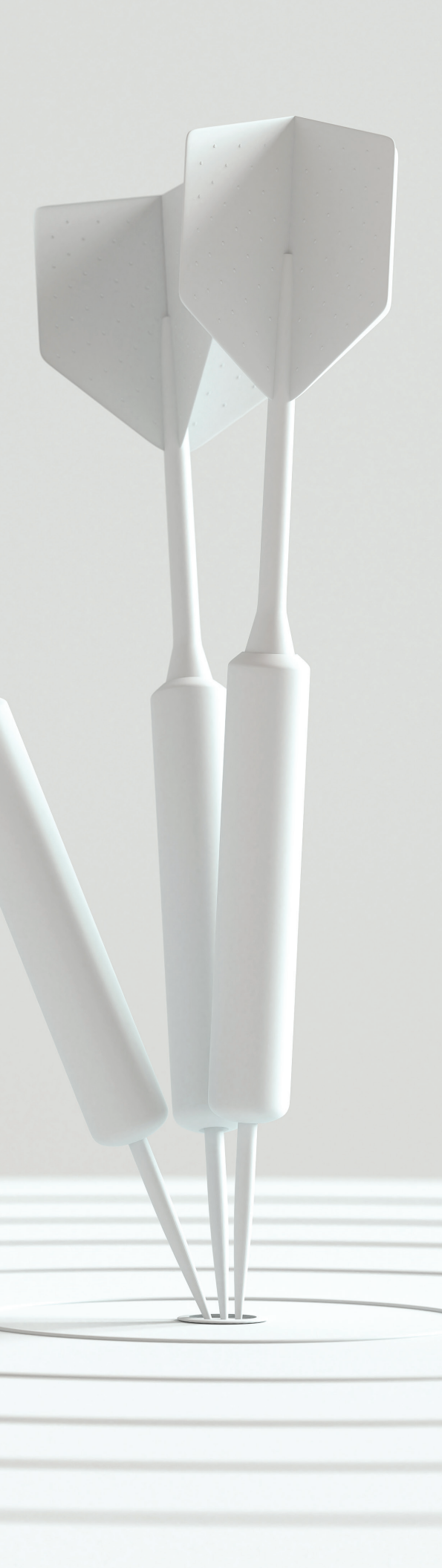


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TARGETPRACTICE

How to Get and Keep More Business

———— By Steve Lewis | Sponsored by SIOR Foundation ————



There is certainly no single winning formula when it comes to being a successful commercial real estate broker, but there is definitely some commonality among SIORs when it comes to what makes them most effective. It basically comes down to maintaining strong personal contacts and a high level of visibility.

“For me, it is all about implementing a system that forces me to focus on building my pipeline of business,” says Landon Williams, SIOR, senior vice president Capital Markets with Cushman & Wakefield/Commercial Advisors in Memphis, Tenn. “With all that goes on in the course of a day, it is easy for business development endeavors to get bumped to the next day, and then the next, and so on. I block off time on my calendar as if it was a meeting I cannot miss. Then, I use that time away from distractions to focus on the business development endeavors of identifying prospective clients and then calling them, emailing them, writing them a note, etc.”

Bjarne Bauer, SIOR, managing partner Commercial Real Estate Transactions with NAI Sofia Group Shanghai, cites “automatized, personalized, systematic follow up.” Examples include a recipient

list of people who receive handwritten notes on relevant holidays, and an entertaining newsletter sent with a personalized greeting six times a year. “Being humble with a constant interest to learn and being passionate about helping our clients” is another key, he adds.

Russell Hughes, SIOR, of Hughes Realty Advisors in Charlotte, N.C., says that “maintaining visibility and top of mind presence with people” is extremely important. He does a monthly video series that averages 1,000 views. “It didn’t start there, but I got into it,” he shares. His other top strategy is one he admits is “extremely old school: handwritten notes.” He adds, however, that they are “very, very well received.”

“I have found the higher the profile you can achieve, the better,” says Greg Gunn, SIOR, senior vice president, Colliers International, Salt Lake City. He shares several suggestions for doing that:

- Join a service club and relevant trade associations;
- See and be seen at strategic meetings;
- Pass out business cards wherever and whenever you can;



Have actual conversations. Text and e-mails don't cut it."

- Become an expert on one particular facet of the business;
- Continually widen your spheres of influence;
- Ask for referrals from satisfied clients;
- Go to SIOR and other industry events to develop lasting relationships with influential people;
- Stay in touch with previous clients; and
- Offer referral fees to a select group of highly successful residential agents.

Success Stories

The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the tasting, and these SIORs have all tasted success as a result of the way they approach business. "I blocked off time on the calendar specifically for business development calls," Williams recalls. "I cold-called a prospective client to see if there was any way I could help him. After meeting with him, he and I identified a single way I could help him. Fast forward two years, and I've already placed the capital he initially needed to place, and I am also working with him to sell another investment property that doesn't fit his portfolio anymore."

"A good friend of mine I've served on a board with always recommended I serve the community, and people would see me be effective, though it was not directly work-related," Hughes shares. "I always stayed in touch the chairwoman; she brought on the CEO of a private equity group who called me."

"A client whom we served 10 years ago on a small consulting assignment seemed to have no further needs over an entire decade, yet we kept sending personalized information materials—without getting responses," Bauer shares. "Then one day when the client had a large property disposition on hand, they invited us to pitch ...and we won a \$50 million listing."

Answering Objections

Potential clients will often have objections. For example, if you are already successful, they may be concerned about the amount of time you'll be able to give them. How do you address such concerns?

"That can happen; the best response is, 'Because I have so many listings, I cover the market better than my competition,'" says Gunn.

"I went from a global firm in LA and New York to a stand-alone—my firm," says Hughes. "One argument that always comes up is 'dots on the map.' The global firm has dots in every conceivable place, but in my experience, I think—especially with the SIOR [designation]—having dots on the map isn't necessarily a positive thing. With the SIOR [designation], I have access to the top 1 percent of brokers in the world; that's who I work with."

"A common objection is 'Why do we need to give you an exclusive assignment—how can we make sure that you cover the entire market?'" Bauer shares. "Our reply is that as their tenant or buyer representative, we will approach any landlord—either directly or indirectly—meaning that we are happy to work with

all landlord representative agents and those that are welcoming our business. By ruling out double representation from the beginning, the client actually has a much better chance of covering all available options in the market and avoiding conflicts of interest."

Meeting the Challenges

Winning a client is certainly a success, but long-term success depends on keeping that client happy, and hopefully growing the business. This, SIORs agree, can be an even more daunting challenge.

"One thing to keep in mind is you can't win them all; business is dynamic," says Gunn. "People change, they can develop new relationships with other agents, they can get fired, move on, get promoted, retire."

But how can brokers fight those changes? "Regular feedback and interaction are critical," he says. "It is much easier to do business with someone you have done business with in the past as opposed to starting fresh with a new person."

"The main bottleneck is time," adds Bauer. "An existing client might have an internal change in management. They may have no current listing or needs. Yet, it is imperative to meet the new decision maker ASAP and re-confirm the business relationship, build rapport and trust. Otherwise, once a need arises, we may no longer be their preferred vendor."

"The biggest challenge involved in keeping existing clients is simply forgetting that I need to focus attention

on constantly re-recruiting them as a client," says Williams.

Outside of providing successful results, he continues, "consistent communication is the most effective way for me to retain existing clients. That includes communication prior to a deal, during a deal, and then well after the deal has closed."

"They are getting shelled at all times; in this market in particular there's a lot of transition," says Hughes. "You might build a relationship over one and a half years, and then they're gone." How does he advise protecting yourself as best you

can from such changes? "Be as high up in the organization as humanly possible and make sure multiple points of contact are maintained," he says. "Maintain a consistency of communication; I'm a big proponent of Outlook reminders."

Point of No Return?

Things sometimes reach the point where clients threaten to sever the relationship. Can those relationships be saved? "Almost every time that circumstance arises, it's been a function of miscommunication," says Hughes. "Once there's clarity on what was intended versus what was

heard or perceived, it usually works itself out—which goes to my number one most important thing to do in maintaining client relationships: have actual conversations. Text and e-mails don't cut it."

Bauer approaches these situations with a mix of patience, persistence, and this message: "Feel free to try elsewhere, and you'll be welcomed back anytime, once you realize that your goals aren't being achieved with a so-called 'free' or 'cheaper service.'" Other clients, he shares, "left us before and when they came back, we became even better friends than before."

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Experience is a Teacher

A good professional in any field learns from their experiences, and SIORs are no exception.

"I avoid being sales-y and the stigma associated with that approach," says Williams. "Real estate investors appreciate authenticity. It is helpful to ask good questions and then present facts along with ideas. Telling relevant stories of past deals are also helpful in relating to potential clients."

"Arguing with the client and speaking bad about competitors is not only bad style, it also rarely leads to success," says Bauer. "Instead, let's learn what the client values, what the client needs, and explore whether or not we can match these values and meet these needs. By learning from the client, the client becomes more willing to learn from us and seriously consider our suggestions (e.g. not to approach the same landlord in parallel through various agents.)"

Bauer also shares how relationships can form from even the unlikelyst of places, such as a small speaking engagement at a local business club where a junior associate made an important introduction which turned into a long-term client. "Lesson: Speaking engagements are almost always worth the effort."

"Be careful to not over promise and under deliver in your attempt to capture the business," says Gunn, offering these additional tips:

- If you drop a name, make sure the referring party is 100 percent on your side;
- Get as much intelligence as you can gather on the people you are meeting with, so you don't put your foot in your mouth; and
- Pay very close attention to what is important to them and what is not.

"I don't think there's a single person out there who appreciates being lied to," says Hughes. "If it's not the right fit, just be honest about it and try to find someone who is."

When it comes to maintaining and growing your list of clients, Bauer says the following can be important keys to your success:

- Strategic partners, such as fellow SIORs, in combination with a great reputation among existing clients;
- Referrals from happy clients; and
- Official and unofficial channel partners like law firms, accounting firms, strategy advisors, international consulates, chambers of commerce, business organizations, HR & recruiting service providers, and others.

"Go back to the basics," Gunn advises. "Brokerage always has been—and always will be—about networking and developing relationships, and realizing those relationships are dynamic and change over time. Nourish the ones you have and develop new ones to build your sphere of influence and replace the relationships you lose." ♥



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