

What "The Princess Bride" Teaches Us About Avoiding Business Development Pitfalls, Part 3

What does the '80s cult classic film "The Princess Bride" have to do with attorney business development (BD) in the 2020s? Surprisingly, a lot – Westley and Princess Buttercup's escapades offer a wealth of lessons for building your book of business. Put your skepticism aside and follow me on an adventure.

Successful BD requires focus, determination and perseverance. To stay on course, lawyers need a strategy to steer clear of, and overcome, obstacles. In the [first](#) and [second](#) articles of this series, I began discussing the pitfalls of business development through the lens of "The Princess Bride." Let's pick up where we left off – navigating BD's quicksand, booby traps and fire swamps.

Pitfall 11: Too Much Jargon or Undefined Jargon

Westley and Buttercup tramp through a scary, forbidding fire swamp. Buttercup asks, "Westley, what about the R.O.U.S.s?"

What about them? R.O.U.S. is undefined jargon for anyone who has not seen the movie. Thankfully, Westley quickly defines the term: "Rodents of Unusual Size? I don't think they exist."

Of course, one immediately comes flying at him and bites him on the arm.

When you live in a world day in and day out, whether it's a fire swamp or the legal environment, it is easy to forget that what is common language for you is jargon for anyone outside your day-to-day work. Jargon equals confusion for your current clients and prospective clients. Avoid industry jargon when you can, but when doing so is not practical, make sure you define what you mean. A good rule of thumb is to err on the side of more explanation, rather than less.

Pitfall 12: Focusing on Yourself

The story takes an unfortunate turn when Prince Humperdinck captures Westley and subjects him to the Machine, a device designed to suck away years of life. Realizing that Buttercup loves Westley and not him, he connects Westley to the machine and sets it at maximum power, leaving Westley for dead. Inigo Montoyo and Fezzik find him and pay a desperate visit to Miracle Max. Miracle Max worked for the king until the prince fired him, shattering his confidence. As he wallows in a pity party, he refuses to help until he learns that Fezzik and Inigo need Westley alive to humiliate Prince Humperdinck.



Chris Moyer

Vice President
Marketing & Social Media
919.714.9184
cmoyer@jaffepr.com

The lesson for business development is to enter every conversation focusing on how to help the other person, not how to benefit personally. Sometimes both of you will benefit, but sometimes your actions will only benefit the other person. The goal is all about building a relationship and creating a situation where the prospect gets to know you and thinks of you favorably when they (or someone they know) have a legal need in the future.

Pitfall 13: Not Adding Value

After commenting that he has never worked for so little, Miracle Max commits to helping Westley and makes a special potion to bring him back from his "mostly dead" state. He coats the capsule in chocolate because he says that makes it go down easier. After working for so little, he could have left this part off, but he didn't, in part because he had rediscovered passion for his craft. For the purpose of our illustration, you could say he was interested in adding value and making the experience as pleasurable as possible.

For lawyers to be successful with business development, it is vital to give without expecting anything in return. This is part of how you can help someone know, like and trust you. What adds value? Sending someone an article with a note saying, "When I read this article, I thought about the challenge you told me about at lunch a few months back. I've highlighted a few parts that seemed like they might be particularly helpful for you."

The concept of give-to-get is that you provide some benefit for a prospect free of charge. The idea of such a loss leader is that you give real value through a deliverable that helps the prospect get a sense of what it's like to work with you – one that you don't get paid for, or paid at your usual rate. A great way to introduce a project is to first learn about something your prospect is facing that you can help with, and then say, "Would it be helpful if I did?" Make sure that your deliverable is your best work – don't skimp on it just because you are not being paid.

Pitfall 14: Waiting for the Perfect Time

Buttercup is being forced to marry the man she does not love, and Inigo Montoya has learned that the man who killed his father is near. But there is a problem. Buttercup and the man who murdered Inigo's father are both behind a locked castle gate that is guarded by 30 men. Not to mention, Westley is still recovering from being mostly dead and can barely hold his head up. Arguably, not the best time to storm the castle.

For attorneys contemplating a new BD initiative, the conditions will never be perfect. You will always be busy. You will always be able to find someone who already speaks or writes about your topic. You will face imposter syndrome. You will fear failure. Results will be slow.

But simply by starting, you will be making progress. The most important step in your business development efforts is the first one. Failure is guaranteed if you never begin.

Once you begin, accept that done is better than perfect. The quest for perfection can be the enemy of success. It is tempting to continue tweaking PowerPoint slides, waiting to post on LinkedIn until the writing is completely perfect or editing an article endlessly. Remember that nobody will scrutinize your work as much as you.

Pitfall 15: Failing to Stay Top of Mind

The time has come for Inigo to get revenge when he comes face-to-face with the man who killed his father many years ago. As an epic swordfight begins, Inigo repeats his line again and again with increasing volume. "Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

Plan to stay in touch with your prospects so they remember you when they need your services. [Success in business development](#) involves staying top of mind. Regardless of how many great relationships you have built, or how many conferences you have attended, it is important that you stay top of mind to your prospects so they think of you when they have a need. There are many ways to do this that don't involve sword fights or repeated death threats, whether through social media or by having a system where you periodically check in with your prospects through some combination of coffee/lunches, loss leaders, or simply sending periodic emails or LinkedIn messages.

Pitfall 16: Doing Business Development the Same Way You Always Have

At the end of the film, Inigo Montoya says, "I've been in the revenge business for so long, I don't know what to do with the rest of my life."

It would be silly for Inigo to remain in the revenge business after he has avenged his father's blood. But this is an easy trap to fall into with business development. Just because something worked in the past does not necessarily mean that you should continue the same habit indefinitely – especially if it's your only approach. As you advance in your practice, tasks that benefited you when you first made partner may no longer be as effective. Perhaps 15 years ago, attending a certain conference was valuable, but it might not be anymore due to the increasing shift to hybrid events, the changing demographics of the conference attendees or evolving nature of your practice.

The line "We've always done it this way" is a personal pet peeve. The only thing that is constant in business is change. Employees change, technology changes, clients change, your skills change (ideally for the better). When it comes to business development, make sure you don't define your future habits by your past.

Just as Westley and Buttercup overcome their challenges, lawyers can emerge victorious in their BD goals. Consider which of the business development pitfalls are most likely to derail your efforts – and put a [BD plan](#) in place to avoid them.

If you need help with developing a business development strategy, contact me, Chris Moyer, at cmoyer@jaffepr.com.