

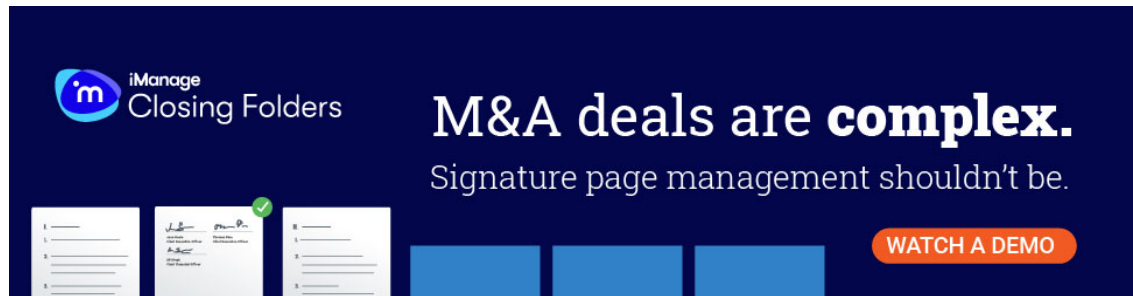
Probable Cause Is the Standard for Follow-Up in Networking, Job Hunting, and Leadership

Stephen E. Seckler

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A few months ago, I was doing a workshop on business development for a client. One of the participants was the managing partner, who asked me, “What is the most common issue you work on with your clients?”



I thought briefly about the question, and then I realized that there was an obvious answer: follow-up. In fact, the issue of follow-up is relevant in all my coaching work, not just the coaching I do on business development.

In marketing, staying top of mind over time is crucial. Follow-up ensures that potential clients and referral sources will think of you when an opportunity presents itself.

Follow-up is also crucial for anyone doing career exploration. Employers like to hire professionals who are interested in their firm or company. Good follow-up demonstrates your interest.

And as in business development, the “right” career opportunity doesn’t come along every day. If you want people in your network to keep thinking of you as

they become aware of firms and companies with hiring needs, then following up over time is important.

Finally, good leaders must find appropriate ways to follow up with their team to make sure everyone is on the same page and feeling motivated to do their best. Follow-up highlights who on your team may be hitting some stumbling blocks. It gives you a chance to ensure that members of your team are focusing on the “right” tasks. Follow-up also demonstrates that you are invested in their success.

Lawyers Do Not Like Rejection

The challenge for lawyers is that we are generally risk averse. We don't like rejection. When we don't hear back from a potential client (i.e., after having a promising initial consultation), we assume this person is not interested in working with us.

If an accountant who serves clients in the same industry has canceled lunch, we assume the accountant is not interested in building a referral relationship.

If we have assigned something to associates or paralegals and they haven't given us an update in a while, we don't want to come across as a micromanager, so we remain passive. We assume that they are on it or that they understand the assignment.

If we have interviewed with another firm or company and we don't hear back, we assume that the employer has found another candidate. Rather than taking the opportunity to demonstrate our continued interest, we assume the worst.

Our natural tendency as lawyers (by disposition and by training) is to analyze. We often overthink things. (See my article [“Stop Thinking \(and Acting\) Like a Lawyer”](#) in the September 2022 issue of *GPSolo eReport*.)

Rome Wasn't Built in a Day—Neither Are Relationships

Humans are not purely rational beings. When it comes to relationships and relationship building, it is important to allow things to build organically. Our analytical tendencies can interfere with our efforts to build rapport. We need to allow time for relationships to build. That requires follow-up.

The truth is, there are many reasons why people cancel appointments or fail to respond. Perhaps they are busy. Maybe your email ended up in their spam folder. Or maybe there was a death in the family, or they are sick.

The key is to assume nothing when you haven't gotten a response.

So, how much certainty do you need to decide that you should follow up?

The Bar for Follow-Up Should Be Low

In my opinion, the bar should be low when deciding whether you should follow up with a potential client, referral source, employer, or direct report. Unless you have a solid reason to believe the other individual isn't interested in connecting, your default should be to follow up.

That's true whether you are trying to build your law practice, trying to advance your career, or trying to develop your team. (For more on this, see my article [“Persistence, Follow-Up, and Avoiding Fatal Attraction”](#) in the April 2022 issue of *GPSolo eReport*.)

To put it in legal terms, don't look for clear and convincing evidence, proof beyond a reasonable doubt, or even a preponderance of the evidence. Don't think you need to get past summary judgment on the issue before you decide to act.

All you need is probable cause.

According to ChatGPT:

Probable cause exists when there is a reasonable basis to believe that a crime has been committed and that the person accused may have

committed it. It is a relatively low standard of proof, requiring more than mere suspicion but not as much evidence as would be required to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The same goes for deciding whether you should follow up with someone.

If there is probable cause to think that it might be worth reaching out a few more times, don't wait for proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

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