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Building a Practice: 3 Secrets to Winning the Legal Beauty Contest

By John Livesay

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Arthur Ashe, the professional tennis pro, said, “The key to success is confidence. The key to confidence is preparation.” Lawyers need to prepare for a legal beauty contest to win a prospective client in the same way that athletes prepare for the Olympics. When you think of beauty contests like the “Super Bowl of meetings,” you will put in the preparation to go above and beyond what is expected.

A dark blue banner for PATLive. On the left, the text reads "Make Every Call Count." in large white font, with "24/7/365 Coverage. 100% U.S. Based. Flexible Call Scripting." in smaller white font below it. On the right, there is a circular logo with a 'P' and the text "PATLive" next to it. Below the logo is an orange button with the text "14-Day Free Trial" in white. The background of the banner shows a blurred image of people in a meeting.

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When the stakes are high, many people get butterflies in their stomachs. Even if you don't get nervous in front of a jury, lawyers often express nerves when in a beauty contest for a prospective client. The goal is not to get rid of the butterflies in your stomach, but to get them to fly in formation. The way to do that is to get the nervous energy out of your stomach and make a gesture when you speak. Remember to get out of your head worrying if the client likes you and focus on what you can do for this client.

The problem with beauty contests is “How do you stand out?” You can request to be the last presenter and hope that makes you more memorable, but you can't control that.

What you can control is your ability to tell a compelling story. Whoever tells the best story typically wins the new client. It doesn't matter whether you're first or last. If you have an emotionally engaging story, you can be memorable, and then the client will want to work with you. Even if

you're the first firm presenting, you can tell such a powerful story about a case study of someone you helped that you can set the bar (pun intended) that others have to top after you.

Remember clients have three unspoken questions when they invite you into a beauty contest.

- **Do I trust you?** This starts in the gut with a basic fight-or-flight response. The handshake originated as a way to show you didn't have a weapon. Make sure you have eye contact with the decision makers and use social proof to build trust.
- **Do I like you?** This is a heart issue. The best way to get people to like you is to show empathy so they see you understand their problems and the pressure that they are under.
- **Will this work for us?** The best way to get answer to the questions in people's head is to tell a story about another client that was in a similar situation and how you helped them. Remember your clients are the hero in a story, and you are the Sherpa helping them climb a mountain.

Start with the gut (trust) and continue up to the heart (likability) and then move to the head (will this work for us?).

Here are three secrets to winning your next beauty contest:

1. Start with a Great Opening Statement

First impressions are key. Even though you may have an hour to present, if you don't pull people in with something they care about in the first 90 seconds, they'll probably tune you out. So don't say, "Thanks for this opportunity. We're excited to be here" as your opening statement. It's not about you, and most likely, nobody cares that you're excited. You're also not saying anything memorable with these lines.

Instead, open with a compelling statement of your understanding of the prospective client's problem and why you believe you're the best team to solve it. The better you can show that you understand their problem, the more likely the prospective client is to think that your firm has their solution.

2. Tell Stories about What Makes You and Your Team Unique

Don't state facts about how long you've worked there, but instead tell a short story about what you love most about being a lawyer and how well you work with your team. Be sure to use the phrase

“What this means for you is . . .” because that is a benefit for your prospective client. Here’s an example: “We work well together, and what that means for you is we’re more productive and easier to work with, so you’re in good hands.”

Good stories have four elements:

- **Exposition:** Paint the picture of who, what, and where the story is taking place.
- **Problem:** Describe this in detail and show obstacles that need to be overcome. Create some drama and conflict.
- **Solution:** Show how your expertise solved this problem.
- **Resolution:** What is life like for your client after you solved their problem?

Often the best way to connect is to show prospective clients that you care about them and will have their back. If you can tell a story about a problem that came up with another client and how you used critical thinking to solve it before it became an even bigger problem, that can build confidence and convince them that you and your team are the right fit.

3. End with a Great Closing Statement

Don’t say, “That’s all we have—any questions?” Instead, summarize your key strengths, your personal passion, your commitment, why this prospective client is so important to you, and what you’ll do for them. This is your chance to show not only that you’re easy to work with and that you have similar values about how you like to work, but also that you’ll go the extra mile to help them succeed.

The next time you have the opportunity to go into a beauty contest, remember that this is your Olympics moment. Don’t wing it. Practice what you’ll say at the opening and the closing. Reverse engineer the entire meeting in your head.

Start at the end and figure out what you want the prospective client to think, feel, and do after you’re finished. Then, plan what you’ll say to make them think you’re the best firm, feel confident that you can do the job, and take the next step of checking your references to hire you.

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Authors

**By John Livesay**

John Livesay, aka “The Pitch Whisperer™,” is a highly sought-after keynote storytelling speaker and a *Forbes* columnist. During his talks, he shares the life-changing lessons he’s learned from his award-winning sales career at Conde Nast to help people become revenue rock stars by forming emotional connections with clients through stories. Livesay is the host of “The Successful Pitch” podcast, which is heard in more than 60 countries. These interviews make him a sales keynote speaker with fresh and relevant content. Livesay’s engaging and energetic TEDx talk, “[Be the Lifeguard of Your Own Life](#),” has more than one million views. His popular topic “How to Ask for What You Want and Get a Yes” has also made him a sought-after guest on dozens of broadcast outlets including *Breakfast with Larry King*. His best-selling book *Better Selling Through Storytelling* is available in hardback (Morgan James, 2019), e-book, and audiobook. Learn more about Livesay on his website, johnlivesay.com and his [YouTube channel](#). You can connect with him on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Facebook](#).

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