

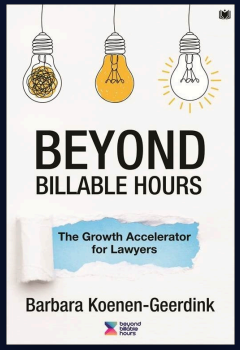
INSIGHTS FROM

Dr Christian Kessel

Former senior big-law partner and industry sector leader. Now a coach, consultant and trainer on business development and strategy for partners, lawyers and law firms.

Business development as part of your *GTM* strategy.

Why vision, focus and steady, intentional effort matter more than elaborate frameworks, and why it pays to start early.



FEATURED IN

Beyond Billable Hours

The Growth Accelerator for Lawyers

BY BARBARA KOENEN-GEERDINK



ASK THE EXPERT

Dr Christian Kessel

For many lawyers, business development only becomes urgent when partnership is on the horizon. In my view, that is far too late.

If you have never built a go-to-market plan before, do not start with some wild activities. Start with vision. Before you book lunches, attend events, or post on LinkedIn, ask yourself where you actually want to go. What kind of work do you want to do over the next five to ten years? Which industries do you genuinely enjoy and want to be involved in? Which types of clients suit your personality? And equally important, which do not?

Your vision should be clear about the target group that you want to focus your BD on. Such focus is not optional. If you try to appeal to everyone, you will reach no one. To take a practical example: as an M&A lawyer, you could technically advise across industries. But marketing yourself nationally to every potential client would be inefficient and unrealistic. By focusing on a specific industry sector, you are able to build depth, credibility, and a recognisable reputation.

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Industry focus creates efficiency. Instead of chasing work everywhere, you build a network within a defined ecosystem. And experience shows, even in M&A, that industry-sector specialisation generates competitive advantages.

That focus requires discipline. Lawyers are often tempted to say yes to everything. A client asks about employment law. A colleague suggests targeting a company outside your chosen industry sector. It feels uncomfortable to decline. My advice is to be intentional. If a client asks for something outside your expertise, refer it to a colleague. It is more honest, better for the client, and strengthens the firm as a whole. Be intentional and keep focusing on your chosen industry sector for your BD – only then will you acquire the reputation as a market leader in your field. Straying from your own plan weakens your overall direction.

When it comes to practical actions that actually generate work, I favour simplicity. The easiest starting point is staying in touch with your existing network. Call former clients. Reconnect with old contacts. Check in with people in January or after the summer and ask how their year is shaping up. Revive relationships that may have gone quiet. Business development does not always require grand gestures. Often, it begins with a telephone call.

I am sceptical about relying too heavily on one-to-one lunches as a primary strategy. They are time-consuming and inefficient if used in isolation. I prefer formats that create scale, and which allow for direct personal relationships and visibility. Seminars, presentations, and industry events are ideal to demonstrate expertise while meeting multiple potential clients at once. And you can interact with them and build personal relationships. These settings build trust: people see how you think, how you solve problems, and whether they would enjoy working with you over months or years.

> **Trust is the true currency of business development. Clients are not buying a commodity; they are committing to a relationship that may last years.**
>
> DR CHRISTIAN KESSEL

And continuous follow up and visibility matter because conversion timelines vary. Some mandates come within weeks or months. Others take years. I once received a major instruction six years after someone attended one of my talks. If you only spend one or two hours a week on BD, that is enough if you do it continuously. The mistake many lawyers make is waiting for a quiet period. But when a case settles unexpectedly, or a transaction falls through, the pipeline is empty. When you do BD right, i.e., regularly and continuously, there will never be an empty pipeline. BD must be steady, not reactive. I recommend blocking time in your diary and protecting it as firmly as a client meeting.

Certain activities look busy but deliver little: writing articles in isolation without a distribution and multiplication plan. Attending events and spending the evening speaking only to colleagues. Having lunch without clarity on who you are targeting. Business development is not about being visible in random places. It is about intentional engagement.

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For lawyers worried about sounding salesy, I would say this: business development is not about aggressive selling or pitching. It is about understanding client needs and demonstrating how you can help. But to adopt at least a sales mindset is extremely helpful and keeps your core intention in focus: to get new or more work in. And, yes, selling in law is sophisticated and relationship-based. It is about positioning your specialisation clearly and confidently, without arrogance. But it also requires being clear about the intended cooperation with the client. Just nice small talk and lots of understanding and empathy for the client won't be enough in the long term. Such discussions need to be converted into instructions for legal work. A sales mindset helps tremendously.

In my own career, I built a reputation as a specialist for automotive suppliers in Germany. Not because I loved cars, but because I saw a gap in the market and enjoyed the technical and commercial complexity of the work. Over time, that focus strengthened my reputation. And reputation brought in more business and that is what ultimately creates freedom. A strong market reputation and resulting strong business allows you to move firms if necessary and reduces dependence on any single platform.

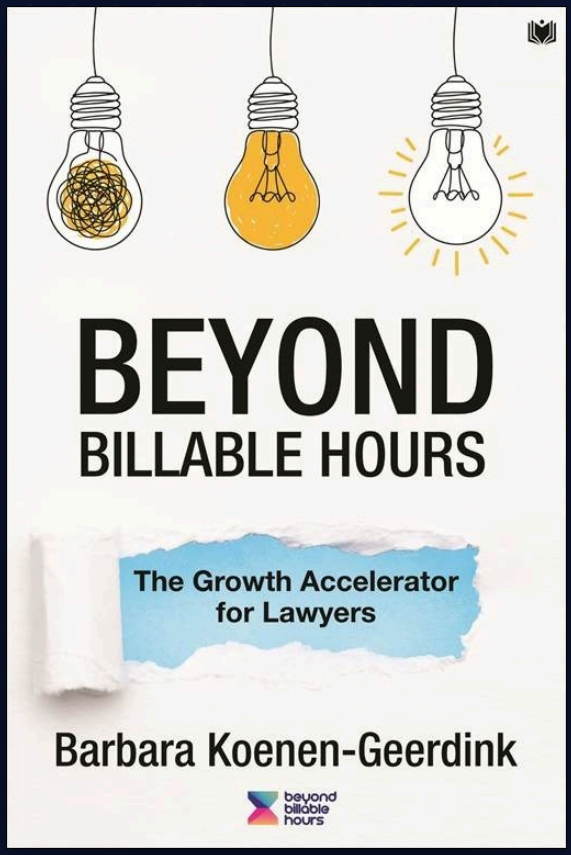
I am also convinced that lawyers should start early with BD. Junior associates should not wait until partnership discussions begin. They should attend client meetings, speak at seminars, and practice business development from the first years of their career. I regularly involved junior lawyers in my seminars and encouraged them to present at least one topic they had already worked and advised on repeatedly. They may have been nervous, but ultimately, were grateful for the experience. The result was confidence, independence and, in some cases, their own client instructions within a year or two. And they all became great business developers.

The most important mindset shift is this: expect business development to be enjoyable. Like any new skill, it feels uncomfortable at first. But proficiency brings confidence, and confidence brings enjoyment. Rather than seeing BD as an additional burden, see it as an investment in autonomy, resilience, reputation, and freedom to choose clients, work, and even law firms.

In the end, Go-To-Market strategy is not about elaborate frameworks. It is about clarity, focus, consistency, intentionality, continuity, and authenticity. Know where you want to go. Align your activities with that direction. Protect time for it. And build trust by one meaningful interaction after another.

GO-TO-MARKET IN SIX WORDS

CLARITY | FOCUS | CONSISTENCY | INTENTIONALITY | CONTINUITY | AUTHENTICITY



Beyond Billable *Hours*

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This piece by Dr Christian Kessel is one of the expert contributions in *Beyond Billable Hours*, a practical guide to growth for lawyers, featuring insights from 24 industry experts.