

Tips for Building International Business Partner Relationships

By Angelina Angelov, MBA



My journey in the legal profession started almost 15 years ago when I began work with Russin, Vecchi & Heredia Bonetti, a law office in the Dominican Republic. I was promoted to law firm administrator in 2007 and almost immediately started looking for a legal industry business association. Naturally, I Googled this to locate such a resource. And just a couple months later, there I was at my first ALA regional conference, in Long Branch, New Jersey. I immediately fell in love with ALA.

Since 2012, I have never missed an Annual Conference. I have made great friends not just from the United States, but from all over the world — people from Australia, Europe and Latin America. At first, I was looking to improve my education specifically in financial reporting. Within a couple years of my membership, I was taking advantage of the many other ALA educational sessions, networking with other members and relying on ALA's business partners as my principal resource for innovation and knowledge management in my firm.

Several years ago, an international ALA friend told me she came to Annual Conference every year for the education and to shop for products and services in the Exhibit Hall. Unlike her, many international ALA members, when thinking about business partners, tend to concentrate on resources available within their countries. But in today's globalized world, we have the option to choose business partners not only from our country but from others as well. The story I am about to share is of a successful relationship between a U.S.-based business partner and an ALA international member firm — my firm.

When I started looking for legal project management and billing software, I found there were several barriers, including issues with language, multiple currencies and different accounting and tax systems, as well as some particulars related to my firm. I also noticed that an ALA conference's Exhibit Hall would normally be filled with business partners that offer their products and services all over the country (including the VIPs) and business partners situated in the city or the region where the conference was taking place.

It took a couple of tries, but at the Annual Conference & Expo in Los Angeles in 2016, I finally found what I was looking for: a legal project management and billing software that was able to fulfill a number of my firm's nonnegotiable requirements. It had an additional advantage, too — its Los Angeles-based provider offered support in English and Spanish. Most importantly, the business partner was also persistent and flexible, so we went through the entire process together looking for solutions. We finally started the implementation just under one year later, and it turned out to be a success.

BUILDING INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

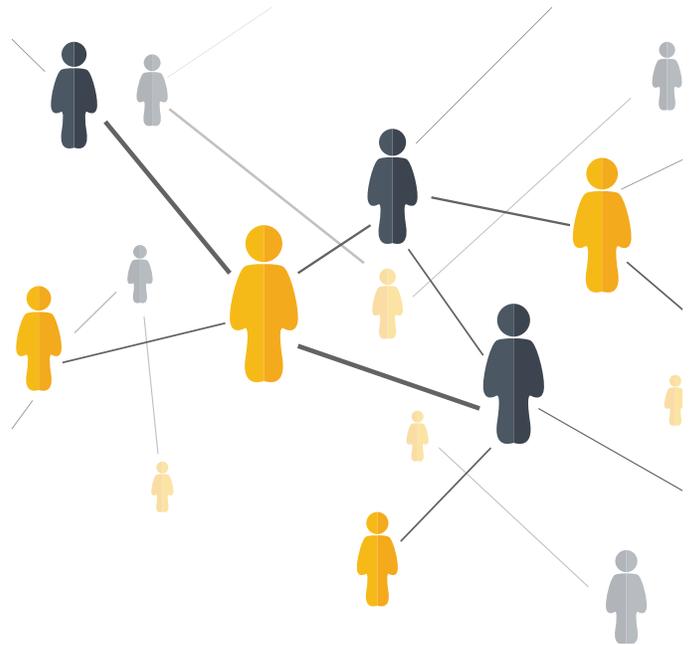
Based on my experience, I wanted to share some tips with other international members looking to establish a long-term, successful relationship with an ALA business partner:

- Have a clear idea of what are you looking for, long before you even start looking.
- Have buy-in from your senior management.

Make sure your potential business partner is patient and understands markets other than the United States — one size does not fit all. A law firm perceived as small for the U.S. market can be considered medium or large somewhere else, dealing with all aspects of business but with a lot less personnel.

- Be sure to have input from all participants within your firm (partners, other lawyers, paralegals, accounting and IT staff).
- Make a prioritized list of requirements. You will almost never be able to obtain them all, but you need to know which are your nonnegotiables.
- Make your expectations clear to your potential business partner.
- Make sure your potential business partner is patient and understands markets other than the United States — one size does not fit all. A law firm perceived as small for the U.S. market can be considered medium or large somewhere else, dealing with all aspects of business but with a lot less personnel.
- Be patient during your selection process. As the principal administrator, you will be held accountable by your senior partners (management) if anything goes wrong. Make sure to tie up all loose ends before you even start.
- If you have all your nonnegotiable requirements assured, prepare a communication plan. Implementing a new software can be frustrating anywhere if you don't deal with it as a project. A simple Word or Excel document can be used, but it must contain dates and responsible personnel.
- Expect that there likely will not be any in-person meetings with the business partner. I only had one in-person meeting with their sales and marketing staff at an Annual Conference.
- Most likely all communication with your potential business partner will be by email or videoconferencing. If you communicate by phone, be mindful of charges — an international call will increase operating costs for both you and your U.S.-based business partner.
- Take baby steps: You do not need to implement all features at once, but make sure to have your short- and long-term objectives.

Perhaps most importantly, remember to be flexible — but still persistent and communicative. In the process of



implementation, a number of things can go wrong. Prepare for resistance, even from people who previously supported you. Flexibility to move expected dates, to smooth the process or to change personnel responsible for the project while regularly reviewing, updating and communicating your plan can be a key to success.

Once you have decided, stick to your plan and do not give up. The success is well worth the time invested! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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