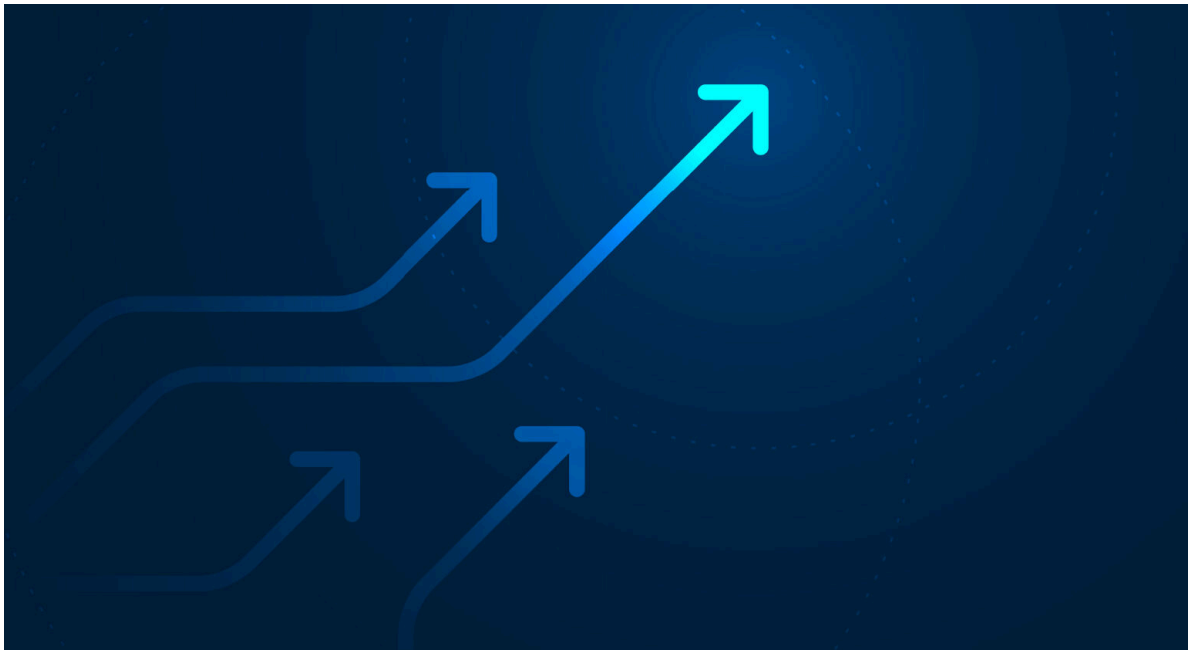
14th August 2026

Setting the right path for effective sales growth

Sales targets are easy to set but without a structured growth plan and sufficient leadership support, firms risk missing out on potentially lucrative revenue streams, writes Mary Cloonan



Growth is rarely absent from an accountancy firm's agenda.

For some firms, this means ambitious organic growth, while others are expanding through acquisition, entering new markets or building specialist services.

Technology – in particular, artificial intelligence (AI) – is changing how work is delivered. Competition for both clients and good people remains strong.

Yet one question deserves more attention at leadership and board level: is our firm actually built to deliver the growth we want?

Setting a revenue target is relatively straightforward. Building the commercial discipline required to achieve it is much harder.

This isn’t simply a marketing issue. It is a leadership issue.

Where will the growth come from?

Any firm targeting significant sales growth over a set period should be able to explain where the additional revenue will come from.

How much will come from existing clients and how much from new ones? Which services carry the greatest potential? Which sectors offer a genuine advantage? What role will pricing play? How much planned growth will depend on acquisition?

These may sound like obvious questions but the answers are rarely as clear as the headline target.

There is a tendency to treat growth as the cumulative result of everybody doing a little more. More networking. More referrals. More content. More partner activity. This approach generates activity without necessarily creating a strategy.

Stronger firms make choices. They identify where the best opportunities lie, then align partner time, investment and resources with these opportunities.

Who “owns” growth in your firm?

In a partnership structure, the instinctive answer is that every partner owns growth. They should. The risk is that, when everyone owns something, no one carries responsibility for the overall picture.

Someone needs to be asking how growth priorities will be translated into action. Are the right opportunities being pursued? Are important client relationships being developed? Are different parts of the firm introducing one another effectively? Is there a healthy pipeline of future work?

This is not about turning partners into something they are not. Effective business development in professional services relies on expertise, relationships and trust. The objective is to create an environment in which partners can use these strengths commercially.

Leveraging existing client relationships

Most established firms already hold an asset a new entrant would spend years building: trusted client relationships. Yet many still know surprisingly little about the commercial potential of their existing client base.

Which relationships are strategically most important? Which clients use only one service? Which businesses are growing or going through change? Which relationships depend heavily on one partner? When did someone last have a conversation with an important client that was not about the work already being delivered?

The importance of listening to clients cannot be understated. The purpose is not simply to enquire as to whether they are satisfied. Good client conversations should aim to uncover changing priorities and potential opportunities, while identifying risks before they become problems.

There is a further potential benefit here. Clients will tell your leadership team things internal reporting can't capture, such as why they chose your firm, what they value about it, where your competitors are stronger and what would make them bring more work.

This is commercial intelligence.

Partner time is an investment

Partner time is one of the most valuable and constrained resources in any firm. It deserves to be treated as an investment.

Often, competing demands – client delivery, people management, recruitment, compliance, internal meetings and the day-to-day running of the business – arrive before business development even enters the picture.

The question for leadership is not simply whether partners are engaging in enough business development activity. A better question is whether the firm's most valuable people are spending enough time on the activities most likely to create future value.

This might be developing a significant client relationship, building visibility in a particular sector, strengthening a referral relationship, mentoring a future rainmaker or pursuing a strategically important prospect.

Not all business development activity is equally valuable.

Does your infrastructure match your ambition?

As firms grow, informal approaches to business development can become harder to sustain.

The managing partner will have less capacity to learn about the intricacies of an important client relationship. Partners may not know what colleagues in other service lines are discussing. Opportunities might sit in individual notebooks and inboxes rather than being visible across the firm.

This is where commercial infrastructure starts to matter. Customer relationship management (CRM) systems are part of it but technology alone will not solve the problem.

The more important questions are whether the firm has a meaningful view of its sales pipeline, key clients have account plans, sector priorities are clear, client feedback reaches leadership and someone is regularly examining what is and is not producing results.

Before investing in another campaign or piece of technology, there is a more fundamental question worth putting to your firm's leadership team: if we ceased all marketing activity for a moment, could we clearly explain how our firm generates growth?

If the answer is not immediately obvious, there is work to do.

The three lenses of effective growth

One way to simplify the growth conversation is to examine it through three lenses:

- **People**: do partners and teams have the time, confidence, information and commercial skills required to create growth?
- **Clients**: is the firm making enough of the relationships and trust already built?
- **Markets**: where is the strongest opportunity to grow?

Technology, marketing, CRM and business development activities all play a role as enablers to sales growth. The starting point is clarity about what the firm is trying to achieve commercially.

Growth belongs at the leadership table

The accounting profession is changing quickly. It is no longer enough to simply review growth-related activities and achievements when the annual numbers arrive. Leadership teams today need visibility of the indicators that come before revenue:

- the strength of the sales pipeline;
- movement within key accounts;
- client sentiment;
- emerging market opportunities;
- partner activity; and
- the firm's ability to convert expertise and relationships into new work.

The most useful question is not "are we growing?" By the time the accounts can answer this question, it's too late.

A better question for leadership is: "are we doing the things today that make the growth we want tomorrow more likely?"

This changes the conversation. Growth is not a marketing target. It is a leadership responsibility.

Mary Cloonan is a strategic marketing adviser and founder of Marketing Clever