



This is an edited transcript of the August 12, 2015 Smart Solo Business podcast interview titled – [Ian Altman on How You Can Become Outrageously Successful Targeting and Winning New Business.](#)

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving to work smarter, find more clients, and build a more profitable business? There is help. Welcome to the Smart Solo Business podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the Smart Solo Business podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host.

Let's face it, nothing is more important to the success of your business as acquiring the right clients and growing your revenue. That's a no-brainer, right? Well, my guest on the podcast today, [Ian Altman](#), helps entrepreneurs like us to discover how to become outrageously successful targeting and winning new business.

Ian is a seasoned and successful entrepreneur himself and a bestselling author. His latest book, [Same Side Selling: A Radical Approach to Break Through Sales Barriers](#), is a must read for any self-employed professional who sells.

[Same Side Selling](#) has received rave reviews from a variety of business and sales luminaries. Here's what top business thinker and bestselling author Daniel Pink had to say: "Altman and Quarles deliver a whole new world of selling, and they're really onto something." I couldn't agree more.

In addition to being an accomplished writer, Ian is a top-rated speaker for Vistage International. He's often called upon to address CEO forums related to revenue growth, innovation, and sales leadership. Over the years, Ian has become a well-known and respected sales educator and advisor to professional service firms and solo practitioners, like us, worldwide.

So if you want to discover how to become outrageously successful targeting and winning new business, then you won't want to miss the innovative sales tips that Ian shares on the podcast today. I hope you enjoy this fascinating interview.

Welcome to the podcast, Ian.



Ian Altman: Stephen, it's great to be back.

Stephen Lahey: It's great to have you back. Since not everybody knows you yet, let's start out by getting a sense of context. Tell us a little bit about your life before you became an entrepreneur and what prompted you to make the leap to self-employment, Ian.

Ian Altman: It's kind of a fun story that I don't get to tell that often. I worked for a mainframe-based company back in the early '90s and I ran an area called client server computing, which is kind of the way we all operate today but it was before anyone knew what it was. The executive leadership of the company didn't want me to pursue these opportunities that were smaller in nature, meaning like PC-based licensing smaller deals because they were trying to defend their mainframe based infrastructure.

I remember the guy who I reported to, Bob, one day I was really frustrated, Bob comes into my office, he says what is it, and I say, well, there's all this business we could get if I just had permission to go after it. He said - like what? I said, well, let me show you, and on the whiteboard I laid out each different client, what they needed, how much money they would spend, why they would spend the money. And then Bob looks and says, wow, there's like over half a million dollars in business there, what do you need from the company to be able to do this stuff? I said, well, I can sell it, I can do the work, I just need their permission. He said they've already said they're not going to give you the permission to do it. I said I know, so what do I do? He goes so why don't you just do it anyway, Ian?

It was one of these like aha moments, like, okay, so I'm actually going to be pursuing business that the company doesn't want to pursue anyhow so there's no conflict of interest, and it was one of those put your money where your mouth is moments because I was confident we could get that business and the company felt it wasn't worth pursuing. And that was 1993 at that point. By 1998, we were a fast 50 company, one of the 50 fastest growing companies in the Washington, DC area, I also started a software company, eventually sold both companies in 2005 to a group of investment bankers out of New York, and eventually grew the company to over a billion dollars in value. But it all came from people kind of trying to defend their market instead of having that abundance mindset of, wait, if our clients want this, we should respond to the market.

Stephen Lahey: It's very interesting, and it's funny because—and you and I didn't talk about this—I was just thinking about writing a blog post about the difference between playing to win and playing not to lose because there really is a big difference, isn't there?

- Ian Altman: Absolutely. But I will tell you that in the early '90s I wasn't thinking any of that stuff. I was just frustrated and cranky; and this guy, Bob, who, by the way, ended up being, I think, my fifth hire and ended up being my COO, he ran my operations for years and I then brought him as a partner into my company years later. When Bob and I would look at these opportunities, Bob just said to me, he said look—at the time I was single, no mortgage—he's like look, if you're not going to do it now, when are you? And I said great, you want to do it with me? He goes, hell no, I've got, you know, a family and a house, you go do it, if it works out you'll give me a call. And of course, I called him several years later and I said hey Bob, I want you to come work for me. Bob said, well, what do you want my job to be? I said I need you to manage me again, and that was it.
- Stephen Lahey: That is fascinating. You had proven yourself. You built a business and then you needed Bob as you scaled up, right?
- Ian Altman: Absolutely. I am not a detail guy. I'm a big picture guy, and if you don't have somebody who can execute and make sure the Ts are crossed and the Is are dotted, then you can end up in a lot of trouble. And when I called Bob in, literally I was working for one of our large pharmaceutical company clients on projects and I couldn't get out of it, so I couldn't work on the business, I was so focused in the business, and literally I said, Bob, I need you to figure out an extraction plan. How do you get me out of here? We can't grow if I'm stuck helping this client.
- Stephen Lahey: That is just so interesting, and we could keep running with this story, but what I want to do now is focus-in on something that I think is of immense value to anybody who sells in the business-to-business space. You wrote a book last year, and I'll give the full title for listeners, [*Same Side Selling: A Radical Approach to Break Through Sales Barriers*](#), and it's probably the best sales book I've ever read.
- Ian Altman: That's nice of you to say.
- Stephen Lahey: Well, it's absolutely true. I've read a lot of sales books. And partially, it's because you had this unique collaboration between you, really a sales expert, and a guy who is a—
- Ian Altman: A procurement guy, Jack Quarles.
- Stephen Lahey: A procurement expert. And it's interesting how you approached this book and illustrated that it's not always clear what the people who buy from us are really buying into and how they actually make their decisions. And the purpose of this book is to replace the kind of tug of war that often

goes on between buyers and sellers with a much more cooperative working relationship and mutual understanding. Is that about right?

Ian Altman: That is about right, Steve. If you think about almost every sales book that's ever been written, almost any article probably, aside from the ones that I write, about sales, they use one of two metaphors. They either use a game metaphor or they use a battle metaphor. In a game metaphor, think about any game, if you're playing chess, if you're playing checkers, if you're playing basketball, one side wins, the other side loses. Now you take it to the next level and use a battle metaphor, the loser dies. And then we wonder why there's adversarial tension between buyers and sellers.

I'm not saying that you have to cave in to what the buyer wants, but instead effective buying and selling is about seeing the world from the other person's perspective and determining, like a puzzle, whether or not you have a good fit. If their puzzle fits with your pieces, then you got something worth talking about. If not, guess what, getting a hammer out isn't going to help that puzzle piece fit any better.

Stephen Lahey: Well, it might temporarily. I'm joking.

Ian Altman: If you hit yourself, maybe you pass out.

Stephen Lahey: Ha! Well, seriously, from my standpoint, there are probably a few things that can trigger that kind of behavior, but from your perspective, what is it that has created this kind of adversarial situation that any of us who sell business-to-business have felt at times?

Ian Altman: Most of it comes down to the sellers' notion that, regardless of what's going on in your world as the buyer, you need my stuff, you just haven't figured it out yet. And so sellers tend to start with this notion that everybody needs my stuff, they're just not smart enough to figure it out.

The reality is, if you step back and think about it and you really analyze your experience with customers, less than half the people you meet who initially you thought were a good fit for you actually end up being a good fit for you. And if you know that to be true, then your goal is not to try and convince them they need your stuff, it's as quickly as possible to get to the truth about whether or not that client has a problem worth solving that you're good at solving. If they do, you have something worth talking about, and now you're seen as somebody who's there to solve, not someone who's there to sell, and it changes the dynamic dramatically.



Think about it. You walk into a store, the hyper-aggressive salesperson walks up to you and says may I help you, we all have the same reaction, no thanks, just looking. It's because millions of salespeople before us have advanced their own cause ahead of their clients', they're selling stuff at all costs, whether the client needs it or not, and we've been conditioned to shut down when we feel like someone is selling to us.

Stephen Lahey:

Last time you and I spoke, a while ago, we were talking about the fact that one of the most common and I think most misunderstood issues is that it really, really matters what market segment you're going after. And now you are basically saying you should go after clients that are ideal in some way because they have this particular problem, it's keenly felt, and they don't need a lot of selling as to "I need to solve this" – they know they need to solve it. I know a lot of people who say, no, you have to make them aware of the problem. Well, they're aware of the problem already. They may frame it a little differently than you might, but they're aware of it. And we come in because we're a great match to help them to actually solve that problem.

I think, personally, zeroing in on your target client, your ideal client, is a big opportunity for a lot of different firms and individuals who are solo consultants. Do you think that's true?

Ian Altman:

I agree with you completely. People like specialists. And specialists nowadays, it's a lot less about the demographic market and it's more about a description of the problem that your client is trying to solve that you're good at solving.

So, for example, you can say, oh, yeah, I'm an IT consulting firm and so we're really good because we work with law firms, so our specialty is law firms. What I would ask them is what problem do you really solve for those law firms? They might say, well, see, we're an IT outsourcing company and so their systems were a mess and so they outsourced it to us. Well, guess what? That's not really the problem you're solving. They weren't saying, oh, we want to outsource our IT. What they were probably saying internally, whether you took the time to realize it or not, is, look, we're losing billable hours, we're looking foolish to our customers because our IT systems aren't reliable. And every time we look bad, every time we lose billable time, we don't recover that opportunity, and so we need someone who can fix that.

Well, understanding that you solve that problem, now you can take a step back and say, hmm, who else faces that problem? Wow, you know what? I bet accounting firms have that problem too. I bet you other professional

services companies have that problem. In fact, I would venture to say companies between X and Y number of people who have billable resources and use their technology a lot have that same problem. And now you realize that you're good at solving that problem of turning unproductive non-billable time into billable time – and this is what your niche is. It's not so much wed to legal or accounting.

Stephen Lahey: And just thinking in terms of the mindset of a lot of these buyers, I think that you're kind of getting into their mindset, that's the message behind this. So, Ian, what are the main questions that buyers in small to midsized organizations, whether they're professional service firms or not, are typically wrestling with when they consider whether or not to hire you or me or any consultant?

Ian Altman: I used to wonder that same thing, and I used to ask people what they thought other people asked, and then we did some research where there were 5000 CEOs and executives around the world. We asked them, I painted the scenario where I say, okay, you're approving a decision in your organization, someone on your team wants to spend \$20,000 on this Gezertenblatt thingy, then what are the five questions you'd have to have answered to either approve or deny that request? Then after going through an exercise, I'd tell them to boil it down to three questions.

And it's surprising because the first time I did it, I didn't know what I was going to get. The 20th time I did it, I had a pretty good idea. Then I started doing this around the world and I was petrified at what someone in another part of the world might say. It turns out, fortunately, people gave the same answers regardless of company size, regardless of where they are around the world, and it comes down to these questions. This is one of those times where your listeners should have a pencil or pen out because they're probably going to find this pretty helpful.

The first question they ask is some combination of what problem does this solve or why do I need it? So you think about it, someone came to them to approve something and they said, well, why do we need this thing to begin with? What problem is it solving for us? Once they agree or believe in the problem it solves, or why they need it, then they simply ask, well, **what's the likely outcome or result that we're going to get from this investment?**

And then a distant third is what are our alternatives or why should we buy this from these people? The reason why that's a distant third is that when I ask people in further detail, I say, okay, so if you were in sync with that vendor about what problem they solve and why you need it and

if you feel that vendor has the highest likelihood of delivering the results you need, isn't that your vendor? Doesn't that already answer the third question? People say, oh yeah, it did.

So really those two questions, what problem does it solve, why do I need it; and then the second question being what's the likely outcome or result, that's the way people make decisions. So if the way you're selling isn't evoking that type of information, if you're not sharing that information with them, then you're actually making the sales process longer and harder for your customer because of that.

Stephen Lahey: And one of the things that, in my professional life, I've been very much aware of is competition. It may seem funny to say that. You may think, oh, of course we all have competitors, but you know what? A lot of people don't think in those terms and they don't think in terms of how these folks who are buyers have been burned before by our competitors

Ian Altman: Let me throw out something that you can use to flush that out, Steve. You can ask them, look, this has been going on for a while, so you've probably tried to solve this before, right? The client says yeah. Okay, so what have you tried? And they'll tell you, and you say, well, how did that work? Oh, it was a train wreck. Right. What do you think caused it to be a disaster? Well, I think this happened, this happened, that happened. Okay. So we need to make sure as we go forward that we're doing what we need to do to be comfortable that you're not walking into that same train wreck again, right? And the client's thinking, wow, I love these people, and all you did was you just avoided a landmine by taking the time to ask a few simple questions.

Stephen Lahey: That's so true. And you have to get to a certain point of trust because otherwise in their mind they're thinking, yeah, sure, I'm now going to tell you just what to say to me to sell me. Yeah, right. So, you do have to be careful, but once you get to that point, generating those open dialogues are really where it's at.

So, this is all part and parcel of being in front of one of those ideal clients where you're convinced, and ultimately they're convinced, that it really is the right match. Your expertise and your focus as a business is squarely upon their problem and their needs and that makes people feel great.

Ian Altman: That's exactly it. One of the greatest factors of why a company selects one vendor over another when it comes to professional services is kind of surprising, and it's how well they feel you understand their situation. And



if you don't take the time to ask a lot of questions and understand their situation, you can't impress them.

Think of it this way. If the vendor takes a lot of time to learn about your situation, then you might feel the vendor is qualified to determine whether or not there's a fit between your needs and what they offer. If the vendor just talks about themselves, the reason why customers then all ask these vetting questions is because they're thinking to themselves, consciously or unconsciously, well, this person doesn't know anything about our business; and since they don't, they can't possibly determine whether or not there's a good fit. So I guess that's my job, so let me ask them a whole bunch of ridiculous questions to see if I can figure out whether or not they're a good fit. If you just take the time to ask about them, they're going to trust that if you're still on the game that you can help them.

Stephen Lahey: Absolutely.

Ian Altman: And it's your job at that point if you can't, to tell them you can't.

Stephen Lahey: Without any doubt. Now, like I said, most of my listeners are solo professional service providers. Most are consultants. And one of the biggest issues for them, as you can guess, is trying to get in front of a buyer in the first place. I mean, the idea of prospecting, it makes them cringe a bit, and I know that you have some pretty innovative ways of reaching out to people and kind of bringing them into a conversation with you over the phone, even if you've never spoken with them before, and potentially setting an appointment, which is really the goal. That's the toughest thing, I think, for any of the folks I'm dealing with. I mean, we can talk about social selling and all these other things, but the reality is it all comes down to having a phone conversation that goes well enough where both you and they to decide it's time to meet. So, can you help them with that?

Ian Altman: First, I would say the goal when you have initial contact is not to have a meeting. The goal, I would argue, is to determine whether or not that client has sufficient urgency to solve a problem that you're good at solving.

Stephen Lahey: Qualification.

Ian Altman: That's first and foremost.

Stephen Lahey: You're so right.

Ian Altman: So that level of qualification because, think about it, if you call up and your goal is, hey, what does it take for me to meet with you, ironically, the person who is least qualified to make a decision is always going to have time to meet with you because no one wants to meet with them. Oh, yeah, sure, I can meet with you, any time you want, my schedule is wide open because I have no authority in this organization, so what time is good for you? That's not the person we want. Instead, we want to be skeptical about, look, are they serious enough about this to make it worth my time?

Now, there's a model we write about in [Same Side Selling](#) called Entice, Disarm, and Discover. The idea behind Entice, Disarm, Discover is that we first entice someone's interest by sharing problems that we solved with dramatic results. We then disarm the notion that we're just there to sell something by acknowledging that most of the people that we talk to aren't a good fit for what we do. Then we charter a discovery phase where we open the opportunity to learn more about their situation to see whether or not we can help. So it would sound like—give an example of, like, one of your clients, what type of business they would be in. We'll kind of talk through it, and then I'll kind of pull together what that Entice, Disarm, Discover sounds like for them. Give me an example of a professional who might be listening right now..

Stephen Lahey: A good example would be an IT consultant of some stripe. Some sort of specialist relating to IT.

Ian Altman: So an IT consultant. Can you think of somebody in particular, I mean, this is a good opportunity for one of your clients to get some free advice.

Stephen Lahey: I can. Someone who deals with, in this case, server technologies and moving your business to the cloud.

Ian Altman: So what problem would someone be having that requires them to move to the cloud?

Stephen Lahey: Well, it's really a decision point. Do they invest in old technology or do they go through the pain of migrating, and, if so, how much is it going to cost? Is it going to be worth it? Will it cost me a lot of downtime of my systems?

Ian Altman: So it sounds like what this client does is they help advise people on whether now the right time to move to the cloud and, if so, how do you avoid disaster.

Stephen Lahey: Exactly.

Ian Altman: Okay. So what it might sound like is this. If they were calling someone, they would say—and typically you want some level of referral or some sort of warm intro, so it may even be that you saw something about them in social media, whatever it happens to be there's something going on that gives you indication they might be interested or be a candidate for what you do.

And when he calls in, he might say my clients typically come to me for one of a few reasons. One is that they're interested in looking at moving to the cloud, but they're concerned that it's going to take up too much time, it could be a disaster, and what sounds great could end up derailing their business and they could be down for a while. The second thing people come to us with is, okay, they're convinced that they want to move to the cloud, but they're not sure which strategy they should implement that's going to get them there the fastest with the least amount of pain. The third group of people that come to us are people who have tried to move to the cloud, it was a train wreck, and they're looking for someone to hold their hand to make sure that they get there seamlessly. Does one of those jump out for you?

And then they'll pick one and they'll say, look—and let me just say at the onset, even though we've delivered amazing results for a lot of organizations, who are facing that challenge – we also find that when we meet with people, only about half the organizations we meet with are a good fit for what it is that we do and how we work. But if that's a challenge you're facing, I'm happy to learn more about your situation to see if we can help.

So, you've now just found an area, so you described the context around the problems that you solve. The client either says no, I'm not facing any of those things, or they say, yes, I'm facing number two, and then you say, wow, we've had great results in that, but only about half the people we meet are a good fit for how we work. But if solving that problem is important to you, then I'm happy to learn more about your situation to see if we can help.

What that does is, it sets up your next meeting to be about diagnosing if their problem is worth solving and what the consequence is to their organization of not solving that problem, rather than you coming in and giving a demo. So what am I doing in my meeting? I'm trying to figure out what problem they're trying to solve and why they need my help, and I'm going to discuss with them what's the likely outcome that they're



seeking, which is exactly the way people make decisions, so now my meeting is set up and aligned with the way executives make decisions.

Stephen Lahey: Absolutely brilliant. And what you're doing is you're keeping in step with their decision making process. And I totally agree with you about the importance of qualification. You're on the phone asking questions, you gave them some choices and made it easy.

Ian Altman: Keep in mind, I'm just making stuff up because I don't understand your client's business entirely.

Stephen Lahey: Understood. But the example gives people a pretty good sense of the approach they need to take. I think that particular approach is so valuable because so many people out there—and we can kind of wrap up with this because I know we're running out of time—but so many people out there are very reluctant to do any kind of prospecting beyond just networking for referrals. I think that that's wrong. Because a lot of these customers, if you don't get a direct referral, you're just not going to get to them by posting brilliant stuff on social media, or whatever.

Ian Altman: Yeah.

Stephen Lahey: Content is fine, but it all comes down to a direct conversation, don't you think?

Ian Altman: You know what? My friend Marcus Sheridan—I don't know if you know Marcus, but—

Stephen Lahey: I know who he is, yes.

Ian Altman: So Marcus is one of the gurus on inbound content marketing, and his mantra is become the best teacher in your space. So if you think about it from the perspective of what are the big problems that your customers are facing and what type of searches are they performing when they're facing those challenges, and now you address those concerns, if your client, the last ten times they were trying to figure out something, stumbled across your content that helped them overcome a challenge, when they want help from somebody, who are they most comfortable dealing with, even if they've never met you? Well, you, because you've been a great resource for them.

Years ago we used to think, well, we don't want to give away our best stuff, and I will tell you, and what I do—and you know this first hand—I give away all my best stuff. I write content every week in *Forbes* that is usually a direct question that someone asked me, or I was delivering a

keynote address and someone asked a question, I'd think, wow, that's a great question I'm sure a lot of people have, and then I'd not only raise what the question was in the article, but I'd say here's how to solve it. And you might think that's giving away a lot of free consulting, but I'm not telling every individual who's reading it how to solve it in their scenario, I'm helping people understand how generically to address that issue, which actually, counterintuitively, makes people want to work with me more rather than less. And so in many cases it's about creating valuable content that helps demonstrate your expertise and build trust from your customers.

Now, once we get there, if I can describe the problem, roles become easier. Because I may not know if someone needs an IT consultant, but if your client said to people, look, my clients are typically struggling with this whole cloud-based decision and they maybe had a bad experience in the past, can you think of one or two organizations that might be facing that specific issue? There's a good chance that someone says oh yeah, I was just talking to a buddy that's facing that right now. But if you said to him do you know somebody who needs an IT consultant, I mean, that's like, you know, it's just such an abstract thing that unless you're an IT consultant, you don't know what it means.

I was speaking in Manchester, England and so I asked somebody to describe what they did as a business. There's a room with hundreds of people, and I said, by a show of hands, how many people understand what that person does? And three people raised their hand. And he goes, well, that's not bad. I said, well, it is bad. Here's the bad news—and of course, I didn't know the answer yet, but I had a pretty good idea—I said keep your hands up if you're in the same business that he's in, and all three of them kept their hand up. So the only person who understood what he did was his competitors. No one else in the room had a clue of what he did. He was a digital marketing guy, and he said I'm in digital marketing and no one knew what it meant.

I said, well, why do people come to you? He says, well, typically because they're not getting enough exposure. I said, okay, well, what do you mean? Well, they're spending a lot of money, but they're not getting results for their marketing, and he describes the whole thing. I said, okay, by a show of hands, how many people in the room now understand what he does? Something like 80% of the room raises his hand. I said, by the way, here's the good news. How many of you want to learn more about what he does during the break? And like 60 people raised their hand. I'm like, all right, I dropped the mic, I'm done. But that was kind of the fun experience of we usually describe things in a way that makes sense to us

and it doesn't make sense to anyone on the planet except for us or our competitors.

Stephen Lahey: As we wrap up, I absolutely want people to connect with you online and follow your posts, and I also highly recommend that they buy your latest book, [Same Side Selling](#). Let's give them some information on to how to do that.

Ian Altman: The simplest thing is [GrowMyRevenue.com](#) is my website, so if you got to GrowMyRevenue.com, you can see all those things. We've got an online learning center that we're launching. The Audible and audio book version of *Same Side Selling*, just recently released and is doing really well. There's a lot more demand for it than we ever thought there would be. I've got a podcast launching, etc. But you'll get all that information through GrowMyRevenue.com. Anybody that's subscribed to my newsletter, and you know because you're subscribed, they get the article that comes out, the same article that I write in *Forbes* comes out to my newsletter subscribers, and then if there's anything new going on, there's usually a sentence in the header that says, hey, by the way, this just came out, I'd love your feedback.

And once again, what I always encourage people to do is, look, if you've got a question, if you're wondering about something, fire me a note. There's a pretty good chance that sometime in the next month you'll see it in an article, or I may even just fire you an email back and say, hey, what do you mean by this? I mean, I live for helping people with these things, so it's kind of fun for me.

Stephen Lahey: Yes, and you are incredibly responsive, which is impressive, and so I would urge folks to go to [GrowMyRevenue.com](#) and subscribe now. If you sell, then you really need to follow what Ian has to say. I never miss it.

I appreciate you taking the time to join us, Ian. Thank you.

Ian Altman: Steve, thanks very much. It's always a pleasure.

Stephen Lahey: And to our listeners, thank you for spending some time with us today. If you like what you heard, visit [SmartSoloBusiness.com](#) now and subscribe by email. Along with fresh podcast and blog content, you'll receive a free copy of my new workbook, [Expand and Improve Your Client Base](#), to help you acquire more of *your* ideal clients. Thanks again for listening and best wishes for your success.



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