BUSINESS MANAGERS MANAGEMENT

We multiply video calls, not contacts

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Video calls speed up qualification, but they do not replace the relationship built on the ground. For a Business Manager, returning to face-to-face can become a real competitive advantage.

Two Roofers, Two Estimates

I need to redo the roof of my house. So I asked for estimates.

The first craftsman asked me to send him photos of the house and the roof from all angles. A few days later, his estimate arrived by email, ready to sign.

The second one came over. He looked at the framework, climbed up to see the condition of the tiles, then we had coffee in the kitchen. He asked me questions I hadn't thought of, shook my hand as he left, and his estimate arrived two days later.

Of course, price, timelines, and guarantees will weigh in my decision. But no one will make me believe that the one who stayed behind his screen scored as many points as the one I met. At least not at this stage.

I often think of this story when I accompany young Business Managers of ESN. For many of them, almost everything happens via video. The first meeting, the second, sometimes even the negotiation.

Let me clarify one thing right away. I’m not going to explain that it was better before. This debate doesn't help anyone. The question that interests me is simpler. What does a BM lose when he no longer leaves his screen, and how did we get there?

Video Has Won, and So Much the Better

Video has become part of the practices, and Covid is surely a major factor. For the initial stages, it is a real improvement. Thirty minutes are enough to verify that a need exists, that you're speaking to the right person, and that it is relevant to go further. Without wasting half a day in commuting. No one regrets that, least of all me.

The problem starts when you expect from video what it is not capable of delivering. Qualifying, yes. Creating the desire to proceed is a different story.

Look at the scene from the other side of the screen. Your counterpart has his headset on and his notifications flashing in a corner. He has a meeting in ten minutes and part of his mind is already there. He listens to you politely, but he is not really present.

Let's be honest, the same scene often exists on the BM's side. I've seen video meetings where the one who had set the appointment was glancing at their email while the client spoke. It's noticeable. And more importantly, it can be felt.

As a result, we multiply video meetings, but not necessarily contacts. We fill an agenda without creating a connection. The client doesn’t really remember you. At best, he vaguely remembers an ESN among others.

How We Got Here

An Exception Taken as the Norm

Yes, we did business during Covid without meeting clients. Sometimes even without meeting our own consultants. But we did it because we had no other choice. It was an adapted world rather than a new world, and especially a temporary one.

A good portion of today's BMs started during this period, or just after. They kept the exception as their mode of operation. Yet in intellectual services, you sell trust before selling a skill. Seeking to extend the absence of human contact seems to go against the grain of the profession.

A Counter That Pushes for Volume

When a manager sets a target of 8, 10, or 12 prospecting appointments per week, sometimes more, it pushes for volume rather than targeting. With such a counter, video becomes the only rational choice. A client appointment, including travel, occupies the space of three videos in the schedule. No one decided to ban fieldwork. The indicator handled it on its own.

This logic relies on an empirical statistical law that everyone knows. The more you sow, the more you reap. It forgets the side effects, starting with the mental exhaustion of a junior who chains screens without ever seeing a client in real life. The line between resilience and stupidity is sometimes thin.

And volume has another, more insidious effect. It creates appointments that engage no one—thus, appointments that are easily dropped. I'll return to this later.

The Perceived Cost of Travel

For many young BMs, a 45-minute drive to a client site feels like a journey to the end of the world. In reality, it's a well-invested morning. But sandwiched between two videos, it seems disproportionate. The

actual cost of the trip is low; its perceived cost is enormous.

The Distance That Protects

There is a reason we talk about less, and that is fear. Fear of having nothing to say to the client outside of one's script. Fear of silence or of the professional question you can't answer. In a video meeting, you keep your notes in sight and can cut it short. Distance protects.

This fear often comes from afar. Some were recruited on a very partial vision of the job, made up of LinkedIn, sourcing, and pushing CVs. The recruiter poorly explained it, or the candidate only heard what they wanted to hear. In either case, no one really told them that a BM spends a good portion of their time being interested in their clients' business. When this business doesn't interest, the screen becomes a convenient refuge.

No One to Imitate

Many juniors trained after 2020 have never seen an experienced BM conduct a face-to-face meeting. Yet this profession is largely learned by imitation. You watch a senior enter a room, greet the receptionist by name, react to a remark slipped in passing. When there's no one to imitate, you replicate what you know. And what you know is the screen.

What the Screen Doesn't Show

The Field

On-site, you see things no camera will show you. A half-empty open space, or conversely overcrowded. The badges of a competing provider left on desks. A project schedule posted on the wall. In a video meeting, you see what your counterpart has chosen to frame, usually a bookshelf or a blurred background.

The Three Minutes in the Hallway

The most useful information rarely arrives during the meeting. It comes when the client escorts you to reception, past the coffee machine, or in the elevator. In those three minutes, they disclose that the budget is already approved, the project starts in March, or that the other provider is beginning to annoy them. A video meeting ends with a click. There is no hallway.

Commitment

A no-show in a video meeting seems less serious than a client absent after an hour of driving. For the BM, it's true. But there are more of them, precisely because a video appointment commits almost no one. Accepting a Teams invitation costs nothing, declining it at the last moment costs nothing as well. Receiving someone traveling for you is already a first commitment.

Consultants on Assignment

They are the big absentee of this trend. The BM who never sees their consultants at the client site misses out on two fronts. First, the consultant feels alone, and an isolated consultant often ends up listening to competitors' solicitations. Secondly, the BM misses all that can be identified simply by being present on site (a new project manager, an expanding team, a need that has not yet been the subject of a consultation).

Imagine a BM who has lunch once a month with their consultant, on site. After a few months, the consultant's manager ends up joining them. That day, the conversation turns to the next project, well before the need is written and disseminated to all listed providers.

The Paradox of Scarcity

All this leads to an amusing paradox. Since almost everyone conducts meetings via video, traveling has become a true differentiator. Ten years ago, a BM visiting their client was simply doing their job. Today, it's noticeable precisely because no one else does.

The challenge goes beyond commercial style. Between freelance platforms and AI tools capable of matching a need and a profile in seconds, the BM who merely transmits CVs becomes replaceable. They already know it, or they will soon feel it.

What cannot be replaced is the relationship. The trust that leads a client to call you before circulating their need. The knowledge of their context, their constraints, and even their moods. All this is built much more easily outside a screen. Human contact seems to me to be a competitive advantage far more than nostalgia.

Practically, How Do We Do It?

I'm not advocating for the removal of video meetings. I'm advocating for putting them back in their place.

The first idea is to sequence rather than to oppose. Video serves to qualify, the field serves to convince and anchor the relationship. When a first video goes well, the right reflex is to propose the next one at the client's site. One sentence is enough: "Next time, I'll come to see you, it will be easier to understand your organization."

Some clients will refuse, and that is their right. Traveling must be earned and proposed at the right time. But many will accept, often more easily than you imagine.

Then, organize your trips instead of undergoing them. Do you have an appointment 45 minutes from your office? Take advantage of it to visit your consultant on a nearby site, or to have coffee with another contact in the sector. A well-filled morning quickly makes you forget the journey to the end of the world.

For managers, the most effective approach concerns the indicator. Counting qualified appointments and advancing opportunities immediately changes behavior. An on-site meeting leading to a need is better than five polite video meetings with no follow-up.

In terms of preparation, replace the script with curiosity. Before a meeting, prepare some questions about your client's industry, their current projects, what keeps them up at night. The fear of having nothing to say disappears when you genuinely want to understand.

Finally, if you are a manager or experienced BM, take a junior with you. A morning on the field by your side will teach them more than ten online trainings on client discovery.

Back to the Roof

My second roofer hasn't invented anything. He did what good merchants have always done. He came over, looked, and listened.

I haven't chosen my craftsman yet. But I already know which one of the two I will call back first.

So, when was the last time you shook a client's hand? And what’s stopping you from doing it next week?