



Beyond Referrals Newsletter Volume 2.5

We all agree that “service” is a big part of any professional consulting offering. But on the issue of how client service fits into your selling model, even the gurus of consulting get it wrong. When it comes to attracting new clients, service is the last thing you should focus on.

Volume 2.5 Client Service Doesn’t Attract Clients

Clients don’t look for a consultant because they want to be treated professionally and with respect. Nor because they want solutions delivered on time and on budget.

They don’t hire consultants so they can get another birthday card, a free lunch, a round of golf, or an invite to a Christmas party.

Clients seek outside assistance for one reason only. They need expertise that they do not have in-house. This is the beginning of the buying process - a client’s recognition of a need for expert assistance. A consultant that matches this need in terms of functional and sectoral expertise will be relevant to, and valued by, this new client.

Clients Are Searching For Relevant Expertise. So Why Would You Advertise Service?

The answer to this great question is that you have assumed similar levels of expertise among your competitors and have thus moved too quickly to “service” as the tie-breaker. To advertise service is to publicly admit a lack of superior expertise.

A potential client in need of assistance scans the environment for potential consulting partners based on who is most relevant to their specific need. At this point in the buying process, service quality is irrelevant to their need. They have a problem and they’re looking for someone with a solution.

It is therefore irrelevant to advertise your firm as a provider of premium service. (I suggest you immediately burn all marketing material that uses the phrase “exceeding expectations”.)

Clients Try And Differentiate Expertise. Help Them To Do So.

Clients will be able to tell who is the expert because the expert will clearly tell them they are an expert. Experts describe their firms as leading providers of specific functional knowledge to clients in specific sectors. This claim of expertise is supported by premium pricing, a selective manner, and client success stories.

Experts know who they are, and which firms value their services. Experts say this clearly on all their interactions and all their marketing materials.

Those that aren't experts focus on other differentiators. For small to mid-size consulting firms, service, process and price are the three worst possible ways to try and differentiate any consulting firm. They are also the most commonly used.

Trying to differentiate on anything other than expertise is in fact a significant clue to the potential client, that you are not the best firm to address their specific challenge.

Service Is The Last Thing To Discuss. Not The First.

In *Managing The Professional Service Firm*, a well-read reference for consulting firms, David Maister extends considerable effort establishing the value of client service. In this regard he is correct. Client service is important. But not for the reasons Maister, and too many other authors, trainers and consulting leaders believe.

A reputation as a provider of quality client service will not attract a client – remember they are looking to see who has expertise that is relevant to their problem.

Although good, or even exceptional client service does not attract clients, poor client service is often the reason for a lost potential client.

The same goes for referrals from existing clients. Good client service alone will not get you a referral – it must be combined with a perception that your firm is the leading expert in its field, but – poor client service alone will lose you the referral every time.

The failing of most client service advocates is that they simply don't understand what role your reputation for client service actually plays in the buying process.

Client Service Is A Valuable Commodity – Not a Valuable Differentiator

Back in 1993 when Maister published *Managing The Professional Service Firm* the notion of service as a strategic advantage was peaking. Today service is a commodity expected by consumers of every kind in North America. They don't look for it. They don't actively measure it. They just expect it. And when it's not there they move on.

Several years ago an inspired entrepreneur decided that instead of being filthy, poorly managed, unfriendly places, auto body shops should be friendly, convenient, safe and well managed. They went on to create an international chain of auto repair shops that looked more like pharmacies than places of automotive repair. They quickly shot to the top of their sector.

Boyd Autobody and Glass (The Boyd Group Inc.) was the leader in changing an entire automotive sector because competitive shops were forced to change the way they deliver their services. But today Boyd looks a lot like everyone else. Everyone's commercials sound like theirs, their facilities look the same, and many offer levels of service and innovation that look like they might have come out of a Boyd operations manual. Their service levels are still valuable – but the day of service making them unique has passed. It's still important as a tool to address buyers remorse, but it no longer makes them different from their competitors.

Client Service Is The Cost Of Entry To The Dance

Having appropriate client service levels is like having a ticket to a dance. It won't attract dance partners, it won't guarantee you will dance, and it won't make you look any different than any of the other attendees. But what it does do is give you the opportunity to find a dance partner.

So would having ten tickets to the dance give you an advantage in your pursuit of a dance partner? No. It just means you would have overpaid by a factor of ten.

Pursuing exceptional customer service levels is like buying ten tickets to the dance. You will increase your expenses, shift your resources, and focus on the wrong areas - negatively affecting your likelihood of acquiring new clients.

What you should do is make sure your service levels are not costing you clients (read: make sure you have a ticket to the dance). What you should not do is embark upon an extended client service initiative to pursue absurd levels of service in the name of business development.

Leave that to the restaurants, hotels, airlines and other commodity service sectors.

You are an expert and people hire you for that reason.

Beyond Referrals has been selected by the Institute of Management Consultants as an "IMC Recommended" professional development program.

For more information about how we help consulting firms and consultants optimize selling processes and sales, contact:

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