

Building Business: The Sales, Marketing, Service Connection

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Professional expertise is essential to you and your firm's success, but it is not enough to increase your client base in and of itself. Increasing your client base involves becoming proficient in three areas: sales, marketing, and client service.

To build your firm, every associate and partner must think of themselves as a salesperson, marketer, and service provider. Most accountants don't think of themselves in this way. They may even find the thought of sales distasteful, the idea of marketing overwhelming, and the elements of service time-consuming.

Sales, marketing, and service efforts don't have to be unpleasant, burdensome tasks. They can and should be interesting, pleasant, and rewarding ways of building your client base and firm. They all involve building excellent client relationships that result in client satisfaction and loyalty. Relationship building is the basis of sales, marketing, and service.

Relationship Selling: Traditional selling focuses on finding ways to persuade people to purchase your services. Relationship selling focuses on helping clients and potential clients make good buying decisions for themselves. By helping your clients solve their problems, meet their needs, understand their options, and choose their solutions, you end building a relationship that cannot be easily replaced. People can find accounting services anywhere; they can't find relationships built around mutual respect, honesty, and collaboration quite as easily. You must make the way you sell as valuable as what you sell.

For example, let's say you have a client for whom you've been doing tax returns for years and you'd like to have them use your small business consulting services as well. Whether or not that client chooses these additional services depends on the relationship you've established. If you merely do the returns, mail them out, and send the invoice, it may be efficient and the client may be satisfied enough but you aren't building the relationship as well as you could. By taking the time to follow-up after tax season with clients to discuss their situation, problems, and priorities—not your consulting services per se—you can help your clients discover what they need and help them make the best decision given their situation. Through this approach, you and your clients determine together if, when, and how your consulting services might help them meet that need. Relationship selling is based on mutual respect, honesty, trust, and collaboration. The emphasis is on maintaining the relationship with or without the sale, but often there are more sales because of the relationship.

Everyday Marketing: Marketing brings to mind things such as brand, image, advertising, sponsorships, promotions, advertising, etc. And yes, these are all important aspects of marketing, but everyday in every situation you have the opportunity to market yourself and your firm. What you say and do, where you put your time and money, how you handle people and situations all send messages about who you are and what you stand for. People like to do business with those who demonstrate integrity, thoughtfulness, competence, and credibility. The best marketing you

can do is establishing and maintaining respectful relationships with everyone you encounter everyday. This will build not only your personal reputation but your firm's reputation as well.

For example, your firm sponsors a Chamber of Commerce event. You have a banner with your firm's name written in large letters, your firm is recognized by the speaker, and you most likely have a table reserved. But are you out there circulating with people, welcoming those you know, reaching out to those you don't know? Are you letting your marketing up to signs, pens, and scratchpads with your name on them or are you out there helping people get to know you as individuals and your firm as a unit? Your everyday marketing opportunity is in the relationships you initiate and foster during and after the events you sponsor.

Another example is your level of participation in local business and professional events and organizations. Every business luncheon you attend; every trade show you participate in; every appointment you have; every committee you serve on presents an everyday marketing opportunity for you. Each time, you have the opportunity to reach out to others, learn about their businesses, and find ways to help them. Each time, you also have the opportunity to create a positive impression, increase your sphere of influence, and send a powerful message about yourself and your firm. You can turn everyday encounters into everyday marketing by developing relationships with as many people as possible.

Service Excellence: Once you've obtained the client, your work is just beginning. When people purchase accounting services, they are purchasing a promise and they expect excellence in the delivery of that promise. It's not like purchasing a car where they can sit in the driver's seat, take a test run, and kick the tires before they buy. They are purchasing a service that they can't see or touch; they are taking a risk to do business with you; they are making a commitment to pay you, usually without knowing the exact amount. For these reasons, building on your initial relationship is vital to maintaining clients over the long haul. Clients expect excellence not only in the actual work you perform—the end product, but also in the manner in which you perform that work—the relationship. Relationship management is the most important part of your work.

For example, partners often bring in new clients and delegate the work to staff accountants and associates. There isn't anything wrong with this system but clients need to understand this system to maintain trust and confidence. Often new clients believe the partner they initially spoke with is the person who will handle their account. That is, until they start receiving phone calls from accountants they don't know asking for additional information or explaining procedures. This raises doubts in the minds of clients and requires them to reveal information to an unknown. If others will be working on an account, they need to be introduced to the client before the work is begun so they can begin building a relationship with the client as well. Strength comes from having a client connected to more than one person in a firm.

Remember, clients want substance as well as style from their accountants. Those who don't provide the style in their delivery of services will lose out. Clients expect promptness, accuracy, courtesy, and graciousness from everyone in your firm. You must develop mutually satisfying relationships with every client you want to maintain.

Accountants who understand the sales-marketing-service connection are most successful in attracting and keeping clients. They understand that the common thread among these three elements of business building is relationship building. The more proficient you become at your relationship building skills, the more successful you and your firm will be.