

Ten Questions to Help You Grow Your Client Base

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By Andrew Sobel

January is a good time to reflect on ways to grow your client base during the coming year. Here are 10 questions you should ask yourself as you plan how to make this year a success:

1. What compelling ideas can you bring to your clients?

Clients frequently comment to me about how they can get virtually identical services from any of dozens of different providers, be they lawyers, consultants, bankers, or even corporate salesmen representing a product line—and that what really distinguishes someone is the ability to offer new ideas, new perspectives, or new information that helps them (the client) think differently about his or her issues. Are you content to do exactly the same thing, year after year, for your clients? If so, you may find that the professional-client bonds that tie you together are slowly and imperceptibly loosening. Think about which new—or perhaps reformulated and re-packaged—ideas can help your clients improve their business. 2004 AND distinguish you from the rest of the pack.

2. What "core" relationships are you going to focus on developing this year?

In any given year, there are a handful of high-potential relationships you should focus on developing with individuals who are currently NOT clients. These "Core" relationships, for most of you, number between 5 and 25, depending on where you are in your career and the exact nature of your services. They should include not just individuals you would like to develop into clients, but also "catalysts," people who can introduce you to potential clients and help make deals happen, and "collaborators," who might be strategic partners to you. You will still want to network widely, and keep in touch with a broad group of people (numbering perhaps in the hundreds) through holiday cards, publications, and so on. But for these high-potential Core Relationships, you'll do more. You'll make personal contact with these individuals several times during the year, send an article or book that corresponds to an important interest they may have, invest to learn more about them as individuals, become educated about their business interests and issues, and in general identify ways to add value to them. Make this list now—and design a program of core relationship-building activities that you can continue. The dividends will be huge.

3. Do your relationships reduce uncertainty for your clients?

Despite the inexorable commoditization of most services, many clients still gravitate towards professionals/firms with whom they have a trusted, personal relationship. A strong relationship provides many benefits, but one of the most important, for the client, is risk reduction. Do your relationships reduce uncertainty for your clients? In essence, I'm asking "Do you REALLY have a deep, trusted relationship with this client?" Here are some of the "risk-reducing" characteristics you should check for in each of your key relationships:

- * There is strong personal and professional trust.
- * There is mutual personal knowledge that helps each of you predict how the other will act under different circumstances.
- * Your clients recognize what you're really, truly good at.

* Your clients are willing to consider using you/your firm for other types of services based on a belief in the high quality of your judgment and in the certainty that you and your firm will always deliver.

*Your clients recognize that the risk and potential additional cost of using a competitor instead of you is just not worth it!

4. Are you clear about whom you do and do not want as a client?

Knowing which clients are right for you, and having the discipline to turn down those who aren't, can really unlock the growth of your business--especially if you're small. The practical implications of this are beautifully illustrated in the article, "The Strategic Power of Saying No" (Susan Bishop, HBR, 11/1/99). Remember that you become what you sell. When you say "yes" to a client, your business mix--for better or for worse--inexorably shifts in a particular direction. Be it's a consciously engineered direction rather than one you stumble onto.

5. What are you going to do this year to ensure that clients call YOU?

Put another way: What's your personal marketing plan look like for this coming year?

Notice that I said "personal" not "company." Even for the largest firms (e.g., Accenture or Merrill Lynch) that spend heavily on brand advertising, the ultimate foundation of a corporate brand for services-based companies is the reputation of the individual professionals that it employs. So whether you're a partner with a big consulting firm, a sales executive with a corporation, or an individual practitioner who does financial planning--you need to constantly work on creating reasons for clients to call YOU. Once they do, you'll have plenty of opportunity to represent the capabilities of your entire organization as opposed to just your own competencies. There are dozens of ways to create this "client pull," and each of you will mix and match them based on what you're good at and are comfortable with. For some (like myself), publishing articles or books will be a key element of personal marketing; for others, the emphasis may be on face-to-face networking at key conferences.

6. Are you prepared to go beyond the letter of your contracts and provide core value, surprise value and personal value?

Clients can get "deliverables"--core value--from anybody. Are you willing to invest the time to be able to offer surprise value--insights about your client's organization and business that go beyond the specific services you're delivering? Are you getting to know your client well enough as a person so that you understand what he or she may benefit from on a personal level? (One client, for example, may want to learn more about your methodologies; another might be more interested in a valuable, personal introduction you can make for her). Remember: It's when you consistently provide all three types of value--core, surprise, and personal--that you truly stand out in your clients' eyes.

7. Do you have a mentor and are you taking opportunities to mentor others?

Those of you who have been fortunate enough to have had mentors in your careers know how powerful such influences can be. Sometimes, it doesn't happen naturally that we have a mentor, and in such cases we need to be more assertive about seeking out advice. Some authors suggest creating a personal "board of directors," which may work well for some but for others (including myself) this seems overly formalistic and contrived. On the other hand, Who will YOU be mentoring in the coming year? In a large firm, that's how you truly build a sustainable business. I do try, for example, to be quite liberal with my own counsel--I get a lot of e-mail with questions sent by people who have read one of my books or articles, and I ALWAYS answer as thoughtfully as I can (in contrast, I have e-mailed the authors of several books that I read in the last year--hey, you'd think that there would exist some author-to-author mutual respect or professional courtesy--only to never to hear back, ever!).

8. Which established clients of yours will you ask for a reference or referral this year?

The final and most often unrealized phase of building your "relationship capital" is when your long-standing clients help you to geometrically multiply your influence. The most common and direct way of achieving this is by getting referrals. Asking a client for a referral may seem distasteful or embarrassing to you, but if you've done a great job for someone, why wouldn't she be delighted to refer you to someone else? There's a further benefit: when a client publicly states his opinion about you, it reinforces his belief enormously. Typically, a referee's enthusiasm for you will only grow over time.

9. Can you clearly communicate to clients how you can help them and their businesses GROW?

I'm not an economist, and even if I were I would probably be no better at forecasting the economy than the next man or woman on the street. However, it's clear that we are emerging from several years of bottom-line preoccupation to a renewed interest in growth, in the broadest possible terms: revenue growth, profit growth, growth in employee loyalty, growth in ethical behavior, growth in investments, and so on. You need to be able to communicate to your clients how your services fit into a growth agenda.

10. During this year, how and when will you bring some silence into your professional and personal life?

Most of the corporate executives and professionals I work with are overwhelmed with "noise"â€”constant demands on the time in the form of interminable meetings, a bottomless pit of e-mails, phones that never stop ringing, and piles of documents to read. Consciously creating more silence in your life can have enormous benefits for you and your clients. Let me give you just two examples:

The research on creativity shows that our most fertile ideas come during a time of reflection and quiet after intensive work. Ask yourself honestly: Do you wish you had more reflection time to really think about your clients' and your own issues, and come up with innovative solutions and alternative ideas?

Because most of us have a bit of the "expert for hire" mentality, we generally fill up any empty space in our client conversations with what are no doubt "interesting" opinions, findings, and facts. After all, we've got so many things to tell our clients! Instead, try leaving some space in your discussionsâ€”some moments of silence. It's highly unlikely that your clients will think you're stupid or have "run out of things to say." On the contrary: You'll come across as empathetic, reflective, and wise!

Create more silence in your life this yearâ€”it will pay dividends in unexpected ways!

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