

**No Client Plan Survives Contact with the Clientâ€™Part II**

Last month, I talked about the importance of a client plan, and the fact that many professionals dislike the process of client planning. Small wonder, since very often it becomes a bureaucratic process overburdened by complex forms.

In that newsletter I set out the first 8 of 16 principles for developing a thoughtful, robust client plan.

The first 8:

**Concentrate on the quality of your thinking, not the forms.**

**Involve your client in designing the plan.**

**Clearly articulate your understanding of the client's goals and strategy.**

**Focus on the key relationships you need to build or strengthen.**

**Identify the buying influences.**

**Understand both rational and personal agendas.**

**Identify how you're going to add value.**

**Map your competition.**

Now let's look at principles 9 through 16:

**Think about share of wallet.** In some fields (e.g., financial services) you can calculate this quite precisely. In other cases, you may be able to estimate your position. At a minimum, think about it this way: Are you a primary provider (number one or two)? Are you second tier, say, in the next group of firms that do steady business with this client? Are you third tier, just getting occasional, ad-hoc pieces of work? This may vary, of course, by specific service. A client of mine likes to use this approach to understanding the size and shape of the "wallet": He draws a cube, with three dimensions: Client level (e.g., headquarters versus field operations or divisions), client geographic locations, and his firm's service offerings. He then asks the relationship manager to map out where they are doing business with the client. Rather quickly, you begin to see the gaps and holes, and you start to think about the easiest expansion routes, which are probably adjacent to existing points of engagement. (You will want to vary the actual axis labels for the cube, so that it makes sense for your own particular business).

**Strategize how to make the wallet larger.** Market share is an interesting statistic, but it never gets me very excited. What intrigues me is expanding the pie with innovative ideas and proposals. When you do this, you're truly leading the client's agenda. Many service markets have high elasticity of demand. Technically, elasticity refers to how demand changes in relation to price (or vice-versa). Here, I'm talking about how demand can increase based on changes in perceived needs, available solutions, and other softer factors. It's OK to strategize about how to steal share from a competitor, but it's more fun to help a client articulate a need that they didn't really know existed. Sometimes, a good article or business book can stimulate this type of demand (e.g., Michael Porter's seminal book, *Competitive Strategy*, or Steven Covey's *The Seven Habits*, both of which led to the creation of large consulting/training firms).

**Ask yourself and your team lots of tough questions.** Good, provocative questions pull us out of the day-to-day mechanics of a relationship and make us reflect. Here are some examples of questions you might want to ask during the initial planning discussions:

Is this, *right now*, a reference-able client? If we called him or her up today and asked for a reference, would it be positive, unqualified, and enthusiastic? If now, why not, and what would it take to move to that position?

What's the most valuable thing we've done for this client—from his/her perspective—in the last six months?

What is this client least happy about? What is the least effective thing we've done for him?

Which are the key relationships we are trying to build with this client? Who is assigned to develop these? (see number 4, above)

What are this clients "red issues" or most pressing issues right now? What are the problems that they would really give an arm and a leg to solve?

What are the major "red flags" or risks that we face as a provider to this client? How can we anticipate or mitigate these?

Do we have the right team in place? Who else from our organization should we be introducing to this client (There are of course many other questions you could ask, and I am making this list the subject of a future newsletter)

**Learn from the past and engage in "prospective hindsight."** Research shows that we usually don't learn from experience (sad but true). We justify all failures as being someone else's fault, and take personal credit for all successes, even if it was luck and not skill. So step one is to honestly assess the successes and failures of the relationship so far. Step two is to ask questions about the future in a way that will prepare you for different possible outcomes. For example, you might ask, "A year from now we have doubled our business with this client. How did that happen?" Or, "A year from now we've been displaced by competitor X. How did they do it?" Again, studies have shown that if you phrase the questions using this format, "X has happened. Now explain it," you get far more profound answers.

**Identify your dream team.** If you have an organization behind you, having the right team is important for at least two reasons: First, your own expertise, skills, and personality will permanently gate your ability to grow and broaden any given client relationship. If you want to bring the best that your firm has to offer to a client, you need to work long and hard at pulling in the right people and resources over the life of the relationship. Second, the importance of networks of relationships is growing. There are more influencers in purchasing decisions, budgetary authority is sometimes held at relatively low levels in an organization, and you need to be able to build what I call “many-to-many” relationships at each of your major clients.

**Get a disinterested, honest broker to participate in the planning process.** This may be the single most important thing you can do to create some new ideas and refresh your thinking about the client. It’s pretty simple: When you are putting your plan together, have a brainstorming session and invite an experienced professional from your firm—someone who is NOT involved in the relationship on a day-to-day basis—to sit in. Ask him or her to react to your thinking, make suggestions, ask questions, and so on. I have found that having an outsider participate in these discussions will push your thinking, make you consider alternatives that you might reject on your own due to internal biases, and help to set the bar higher for what you should aspire to.

**Convert the plan to specific action steps and monitor progress.** Once you’ve worked through all the elements in principles 1-14, then you need to make a list of who is going to do what, when. You can then create a monthly calendar or quarterly schedule— whatever format works best for you—which specifies how you’re going to accomplish the things you’ve set out in the plan. Once a month or so, pull this action list (it should fit on one page!) out of your pocket and review it. Ask your colleagues, every so nicely, how they are doing with the various items they committed to. Do this regularly, asking softly, always with a smile, and eventually you’ll wear everyone around you down and you’ll actually see some traction on the plan.

**Follow up with a comprehensive, mid-year review of the relationship.** Usually, client plans are begrudgingly written, filed for the next 12 months in the deepest recesses of a hard drive or storage cabinet, and forgotten. It is essential to hold, at a minimum after six months, an in-depth review of the plan and the state of the client relationship. This doesn’t have to take more than a couple of hours. Sit down with your team, review the plan, assess your progress, and look at the numbers. What changes have occurred in the organization? Are there some new executives you need to build a relationship with? How are your competitors doing? What internal or external events have occurred? This is a chance to refine the plan and reinvigorate your efforts to grow the relationship. And yes, this is an ideal moment to have that uninvolved, experienced colleague participate in the discussions to help push your thinking.

If you already have a client or account planning process, use these ideas to richen it. If it’s become too bureaucratic, try going back to basics—forget about all the forms, and concentrate on having a truly reflective conversation about where you can take the relationship. If you don’t do client plans at all, then think about starting with just a few of these principles, and slowly working your way towards a more formal process.

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