The Next Level: Trusted Client Partner

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Some firms call them "office of the chairman" accounts, while others simply refer to them as key clients. These are the flagship client relationships that propel your growth in good times and provide essential ballast in a downturn. They are broad and deep, transcending any one individual professional or service offering. Usually, they endure for years.

These trusted partnerships account for a disproportionate share of most firms' revenues, profits, and intellectual capital. An archetypical example is Booz Allen Hamilton's 70-year continuous relationship with the U.S. Navy?truly a client for life

Everyone would like to have more of these long-term, institutional relationships?but what roadmap should you follow? During the research for my new book, All for One, I studied over 50 flagship client relationships in an effort to determine how, precisely, great service firms consistently build and sustain such enduring client relationships. I wanted to know: What strategies do they use? Why do some client relationships grow, while others fade away? How do they turn individual relationships into institutional ones? What kind of organizational culture do they develop to support these giant "redwoods" that are seemingly impervious to storms and disease?

Becoming A Trusted Client Partner

The telltale characteristics of a trusted client partnership will probably be familiar to many readers. The starting point is usually a single trusted advisor relationship with a key economic buyer at the client. Around this are then built many-to-many relationships at multiple levels in the client's organization.

Often, the bond is forged in the crucible of a crisis, transition, or transformation. A personal relationship usually develops?you're not necessarily best friends with the client, but you get to know each other as people and you probably end up helping them on a personal level in some important way. Invariably, the work advances the client's agenda of important strategic and operational issues?these partnerships are not constructed on minor problems and commodity services.

What is striking is that these relationships are usually not the result of the derring-do of a single, powerful rainmaker. Nor do they prosper solely on the back of one unique or compelling service offering. Rather, they grow and develop due to an integrated set of individual and institutional capabilities that are rooted in a culture of collaboration and client focus.

In other words, the organization and management processes surrounding the rainmaker are just as ual professional has to build her own network, learn how to engage with senior executives, and, ultimately, transition from having a purely individual relationship to an institutional one. On the other hand, firm leadership must cultivate a culture of collaboration, support the training and development of client relationship managers, and make sure the measurement and reward system supports long-term relationship building efforts. It's the combination of the two?individual effort and firm initiatives?that is so powerful.

Going Beyond the Conventional Wisdom

To build trusted client partnerships, you have to reach well beyond the conventional wisdom about developing client relationships. What do I mean? For example:

1. *Conventional wisdom:*
"Ultimately all client value boils down to either improving revenues or cutting costs."

> *Truth*: Value is tangible, intangible, institutional and personal; and you must deliver all of these?in a mixture tailored to your specific client?to build a trusted partnership.

2. *Conventional wisdom*: "Knowing your client's business is critical."

> *Truth*: Mere client knowledge no longer sets you apart?the threshold is now much higher. You need to become an agenda setter who has built truly deep client knowledge on multiple levels and thus earned a seat at the table.

3. *Conventional wisdom*: "Consistent quality and delivery are essential to differentiate your service."

> *Truth*: These just get you in the game. Today, you need to differentiate your firm by creating a unique client experience.

4. *Conventional wisdom*: "Top executives are focused like a laser on value for money."

> *Truth*: Top executives are focused on value for time

5. *Conventional wisdom*: "You have to be big and global to serve large clients well"

> *Truth*: Today it is all about focus and making the parts work together well, not just size alone. Sm firms can outcompete much larger ones.

Becoming an Agenda Setter

The foundational strategy for building trusted client partnerships is something that I call "agenda setting." Small, expert-for-hire relationships can be built on agenda reacting, where you take orders agenda?their most critical priorities, needs, and goals?at both a company and a personal level.

As one CEO put it, "There are plenty of consultants, lawyers and other professionals out there who have good technical skills. But that doesn't distinguish them. It's the ones who are able to really understand me and my business?who can connect what they are doing to my most important priorities and goals?who become part of my inner circle." Agenda Setting requires a new level of investment in client understanding, and a broad-based knowledge of the key forces affecting your client's business.

An agenda-setting mindset is essential for connecting with c-level executives. One of my clients flew in a team from all over the world to meet with a CEO they had been wooing for over a year. They were determined to pitch a state-of-the art system to him, one that they believed was critical to his company. Fifteen minutes into the session, the CEO was tapping his foot, glancing at his BlackBerry, and looking around the room. He then abruptly got up, thanked the group for their time, and excused himself to attend another meeting. A few days later, my client discovered a video of the CEO addressing an investor conference just days earlier. At the conference, he had laid out his new strategy?one for which, you can guess, my client's system had little relevance. They failed to connect with his agenda, and he disengaged immediately.

You can observe this yourself: when your client's attention wanders, it's a warning sign. You can refocus by asking, "What's the most important thing we should be talking about today?"

Effective Agenda Setting requires four things:

First, you must develop an appreciation for the pressures and concerns of top executives?you must be able to put yourself in their shoes and see the world through their lenses.

Second, you have to be creative in how you approach Agenda Setting, and learn the delicate art of executive conversations in which you indirectly tease out a client's most pressing issues by asking thoughtful questions that inherently demonstrate your knowledge and experience. You also have to tap into a variety of perspectives on a company's Agenda, such as that of the board and senior management, the marketplace (what are customers saying?), the organization (what do front-line managers think?), the capital markets (what is the perspective of investors?), and so on.

Third, you must learn to influence a client's agenda using intellect, emotions, metaphors, stories, and a variety of other techniques. A PowerPoint slide deck just won't do it.

Finally, you have to be bold enough to hold specific agenda-setting conversations with your client, and to challenge or probe the implementation of their agenda.

Agenda Setting is the first of multiple strategies that successful firms employ to launch a trusted client partnership. In the next issue of Client Loyalty I will explore how can grow revenues by turning an individual relationship into an institutional one.

Andrew Sobel is the leading authority on client relationships and the skills and strategies required to earn enduring client loyalty. The most widely published author in the world on business relationships, he is a consultant and educator to major services firms worldwide. Andrew is the author of the newly-released All for One: 10 Strategies for Building Trusted Client Partnerships (John Wiley & Sons, 2009) as well as the business bestsellers Clients for Life and Making Rain. He was a Senior Vice President and Country Managing Director for Gemini Consulting, and for the last 13 years he has led his own consulting firm, Andrew Sobel Advisors, Inc. He can be reached at www.andrewsobel.com (Tel: 505.982.0211).