

### Keeping Relationships Fresh

#### Question

I've been working for several years with the same client. How can I keep the relationship fresh?

#### Answer

If you're not careful, the virtues of a long-term relationship can quickly become vices. Over time, you may take your client for granted and become complacent. How do you prevent this and keep things fresh and vital? Here are some strategies you should try:

**Treat all old clients like new clients.** You have to bring the same enthusiasm, new ideas, effort, and excitement to the 100th meeting with your clients that you demonstrated in the first meeting when you were wooing them.

**Ask, "What would my competitors do to try and win this client's business?"** This is not a rhetorical question because your competitors are regularly trying to win a greater share of your client's business. Think through what their strategies might be, and consider taking these actions yourself.

**Change horses.** A few large firms I know will systematically rotate some team members off of a client relationship once they have been there for a certain period of time, usually a year or two. This is good for your staff and also good for the client, because it can bring fresh thinking into the engagement.

**Add value in new ways.** Is there a well-known academic or industry expert whose ideas would be relevant to your client? Can you use collaboration technologies to better connect with your client? Are there ancillary firms (individuals, boutiques) that you could use to offer something special to your client? Can you connect your client to other clients that you have? Can you bring someone in who can help your client better understand the impact of certain trends? (e.g., the impact of social networking or changing workplace demographics). Could your firm and the client co-develop some intellectual capital together (or co-author an article)? Can you invite your client to host or speak at a conference? Are there long-term fee arrangements that would more closely align your interests as long-term partners?

**Alter the relationship experience environment.** Over time, you tend to get into habits and routines in the way you manage your relationships. Perhaps you always meet your client in the same office or conference room, and use the same format for presentations and memos. The findings of a recent study of couples who have been married for a number of years may be relevant to this issue. In this study, when couples did the same things they always do—e.g., go to the movies on Saturday night, have dinner at a favorite restaurant on Wednesday, etc.—their feelings about the relationship remained unchanged.

When couples did *new* things together, however—e.g., when they visited a museum they had never been to or explored a new restaurant, their reported feelings of intimacy and closeness grew noticeably. I am convinced the same applies to professional relationships with clients. Organize an offsite instead of meeting all day in the client's conference room. Take your client out to dinner with several of your other interesting business contacts. Instead of PowerPoint slides, use oversized sheets of paper that you tape to the walls of the conference room.