

When A Client Doesn't Want a Relationship

1 Determine why the individual doesn't want to have a relationship with you.

There may be at least five reasons:

- The client has not developed enough trust in you—and/or your firm—to feel comfortable opening up and having a real relationship.
- The client, because of their particular character and personality, does not build close relationships with outsiders or possibly with anyone at work.
- The client views it as politically unwise or incorrect to associate with you.
- At this point in time, the client doesn't believe you have anything to offer that addresses one of their key priorities or goals.
- The client has a strong relationship with a competitor, and isn't interested in building a relationship with a new provider.

2 Temper your expectations.

Often, the external advisor is more eager to develop a personal relationship than the client is—sometimes relationships are asymmetrical. A large project or transaction may be extremely important to you, and it may consume the majority of your time for a period of weeks, months, or even years. Naturally, you want to have a great relationship with your client. For a senior client executive, however, your engagement may represent only a fraction of her responsibilities, and developing a relationship with you may not be a priority.

3 Remember that different people develop trust at different speeds.

I have known some clients with whom I immediately clicked, and within a few months we had already progressed to a trusted advisor relationship. Others have required a year or two of working together to reach this stage. Be patient.

4 Find their hot button.

Think about whether or not you truly have identified a vital interest, need, or goal of the executive and shown that you can help with it. Remember, everyone—even the most hard-boiled, aloof client—has something they are trying to accomplish. If someone doesn't trust you, it's sometimes because you simply haven't demonstrated the ability to help them with an important challenge.

5 Consider shifting your focus to other clients.

If politics or other factors you cannot control or influence are involved, you may want to accept the situation and be content with an “expert for hire” type of arms-length relationship—or even, move on to more fertile grounds.