

Six Essential Roles You Should Play with Client Executives

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By Andrew Sobel

Have you ever gotten a call from a client who said, "I just want to run something by you"? Perhaps on a different day that same client asked you, "How's my team doing?" On yet a different occasion he or she may have pushed you to talk about what you're seeing out in the marketplace and how other companies are dealing with the same issue.

You may not explicitly think about it this way, but in fact you play quite different roles with your clients. I have identified the six most common and important ones. Each is valuable in its own right. By recognizing these roles and cultivating them intentionally with your clients, you will add more value and dramatically strengthen your relationships.

While there is not a fixed sequence to these six roles, they tend to develop and come into play as a relationship matures. I have numbered them one to six, although this order is approximate.

ROLE ONE: EXPERT

This is the very first and most fundamental role we usually play with a prospective or brand new client. That's why expertise development is so important to attracting new clients. When it comes to sales, your expertise is the tip of your spear. The more "branded" your expertise, the more powerful the attraction and the higher the fees you can command. The art of client development, however, is sharing your expertise without the limitations of the narrow expert mindset. Senior executives want insights on how to solve a specific problem or challenge. They don't want a lecture or PowerPoint slide presentation on all the details of your methodology. They want to have a value-added conversation about their issues.

Questions for reflection: How strong, really, is your own expertise? How would you rate the strength of your expert brand in your chosen market? (e.g., One of the top authorities? A recognized expert? Someone with a strong skill base but not much recognition so far?)

ROLE TWO: MARKET CROSSROADS

When you're playing the Market Crossroads role, you're able to share valuable and interesting insights about the external world around your client. This includes markets, competitors, customers, and trends. This is also an essential role for business development: If executives view you as being at the crossroads of the market—someone who is always out there talking to important players and gaining an intimate view of what's going on—they will always be willing to give you twenty minutes of their time.

Questions for reflection: Are you at the market crossroads? Do you spend enough time talking to people, reading, and circulating among those in the know? Are you spending so much time with just one or two clients that your ability to play this role is diminishing?

ROLE THREE: BIG PICTURE THINKER

Expertise is valuable, but good big-picture thinking is even more prized by clients. In your role as a big picture thinker, you help your clients identify the most important issues among many; you see the patterns and interrelationships; and you may also reframe the problem. You pull your client out of the weeds and show them the bigger landscape.

For example: Investment banker Michael Milken performed a phenomenal act of big picture thinking (also called synthesis) when he single-handedly spurred the growth of the high-yield or "junk" bond market in the 1980s. He had spent years studying these so-called junk bonds, and he discovered that the risk-return ratio was not adequately reflected in their

price. In other words, they were an undiscovered opportunity for corporate financing that other bankers were ignoring.

Questions for reflection: Do you bring sufficient big-picture thinking to your clients? Or do you often get pulled into the weeds and absorbed with day to day project execution?

ROLE FOUR: VISIONARY

As the Visionary, you focus on understanding and helping to shape your clients highest-level aspirations. You push them to be stretch and be bold. Often, you start with questionsâ€”for example:

§ What do you want your business to look like in three years' time?

§ What would you like your legacy to be when you leave this role?

§ As you think about the next couple of years, and the various initiatives you have in place, what are you personally most excited about?

§ How would you describe your agenda of critical priorities for the next 12 months?

§ Why have you chosen this strategy (or this goal)?

Remember, when you ask "Why?"â€”perhaps several timesâ€”you will drive the conversation closer to the other person's high level goals and underlying motivations.

Questions for reflection: Are you even having these conversations with your clients? What's stopping you? If you're dealing with more junior executives, can you still tap into their goals and aspirations for their particular area and for their own careers?

Roles three and fourâ€”Big Picture Thinker and Visionaryâ€”are what can transform your relationship from expert provider (one) to trusted client advisor.

ROLE FIVE: COMPANY INSIGHT

Clients initially seek you out for your subject matter expertise, but they later value you especially for your knowledge of them and their business. One CEO said to me, "There are plenty of experts out thereâ€”consultants, accountants, bankers, and so on. But it's the one who has invested the time to really understand me and my business that stands head and shoulders above the crowd." When you invest to build deep client knowledge, the value you add becomes much more specific, contextualized, and customized. This role is especially important for younger professionals who lack grey hair and decades of experience. No matter what your age, if you can speak credibility to a top executive about their organization and make value-added observations and suggestions, you'll be well on your way to earning a seat at the table.

Questions for reflection: Have you invested enough time to really understand your client's business? Have you visited their operations, walked the halls, and chatted with a wide range of employees?

ROLE SIX: SOUNDING BOARD

Once a client gets to know you, you can play another important role: Sounding board. In this role, you provide a safe haven for your client to bounce ideas off you, discuss career and possibly other personal issues, and brainstorm their challenges without a formal engagement or project in place. The key is to make your client comfortable in using you this way. You do this by creating lots of small, frequent interactions; getting them out of the office; and letting them know you're always

available to just chat. Then, when they do raise an issue with you, follow up appropriately. You might give some advice over the phone, for example “if that’s what the client wants” and then follow up the next day with a thoughtful email summarizing your views, or a relevant article that will be helpful.

Questions for reflection: Do your clients use you as a sounding board? If not, why not? What could you do to encourage them to take advantage of this aspect of your relationship?

Actions You Can Take

The six roles, in summary, are: Expert, Market Crossroads, Big Picture Thinker, Visionary, Company Insight, and Sounding Board.

At the top of a sheet of paper, going across horizontally, list the six roles. Then, down the left margin, write down a list of your most important clients. For each client, circle those roles that you could strengthen and where you think there is opportunity to add more value. You will undoubtedly discover gaps and potential opportunities to deepen and strengthen the relationship.