

Trusted Advice

Adapting to New Economic Factors Facing the Professional

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If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to see things from the other person's angle as well as your own.

--- Henry Ford

The continuing slow-down in the building design and construction economy has generated the need for a new look at the future business models for all professional services. Whether designer, consultant, contractor, design/builder or manufacturer, it is becoming increasingly imperative to move toward providing value-focused advisory services that work in concert with each customer's own business strategies. Finding resources that help understand market trends and market influences will improve the quality of services. Learning to interact in a proactive way with both existing and new customers can build continuing revenue sources even in sluggish times.

The Economic Outlook McGraw-Hill Construction (www.construction.com) recently started their annual Fall economic "Outlook" programs. These regional programs are an excellent place to learn, segment by segment, the historic and projected trends in all sectors of the commercial building industry. Their projections for 2003 show a continued 4% decrease in the overall building design and construction industry. This follows an equally slow 2002. This continued slowdown already has had an impact on both the design consulting and system integration business. The good news is that they predict an upturn of 5% in 2004. The trick is to survive.

The McGraw-Hill survey shows that many institutional sectors (e.g., worship space, higher education, and healthcare) will continue to grow at a significant pace, if slightly slower than recent years. Other markets that focus on major public and private funding (e.g., hospitality, including sports and convention facilities, and corporate building) will continue on a downward trend.

Your trusted advisor business development efforts will only improve when you learn to talk about what the customer wants, and we learn to show them how to get it. Clients buy for their reasons, not for ours. The service provider's job is to find out what their reasons are. The real measure of good selling is being good at getting the client to tell you their problems, needs, wants and concerns.

If the customer is talking about what they want, you are a step ahead of your competitors. If you are doing most of the talking, you are probably in a losing effort. Most of the time, salespeople talk too much. The key is to learn to ask good questions and listen well. If you say it, they can doubt you (and usually will). If they say it, they usually believe it is true. Client buying decisions based on impressions and perceptions always overshadow those based on reason and logic. The role of symbolism and metaphor has an important role in influencing impressions and perceptions. That is an important lesson to learn.

People hate it when they are aware they are being "sold." However, they love to buy. We are most successful when we stop trying to get what we want, and start to help our clients get what they want. Good selling takes time, and requires a trust-based relationship with the buyer. If you focus your efforts on fewer prospects and devote more time to each, you will come out ahead.

An important lesson is to treat all prospects as if they were already clients. The vast majority of professional projects are awarded at the pre-proposal stage. The formal proposal and presentation only serve to confirm (or refute) a decision they have already made. If you do not spend time, in first-person contact, up-front and before the request for proposal is released, do not bother writing the proposal.

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Strategic and competitive information collection is the key to success. Think about what you need to know in order to understand the client's situation? What can you learn about their business in advance? Begin by emphasizing (and keep emphasizing) the things on which you agree. Get the customer to say, "yes" early. Keep them, if possible, from saying "no." Even the most persuasive logic fails if you try to rush. Do not omit each step in the logical progression of your argument.

Building an advisory team in order to implement new and effective business development programs, that acknowledge these new trends in the provision of professional services, your sales staff and your principals will need to agree to be coached and managed in mutually agreed to standards.

By building teams that are judged solely on the performance of the team, personal statistics become relevant only in their contribution to the benefit of the team. The leader's job is to coach the team members on the imperative of excellence standards. The consequences of non-compliance should be help, support, and encouragement toward actions that benefit your organization's business goals.

It is important to emphasize that teamwork is mandatory, not optional. We are at a critical time where the "cowboy" attitudes that have characterized the big producers of the past, need to give way to a more collaborative effort. This will require every participant to belong to a team with strict accountability for projects with which the organization is committed.

Continual learning is mandatory to success. Find ways in your sales organization to show you're your teams are:

- Generating better business, not just more business;
- Lowering the cost to your business of performing selected tasks;
- Becoming more valuable to clients on current projects; and
- Sharing knowledge of business development and process skills both horizontally and vertically.

The Client Satisfaction Survey from Tom Peter's *In Search for Excellence* is the standard for professional service firms. By instituting mandatory client feedback on every project, with full and detailed follow-up, the results can be used in performance measurement and incentive compensation. With a true focus on client service, you firm may eventually be able to offer an unconditional satisfaction guarantee on your projects. That is a powerful message.

The desire for personal professional growth should be a minimum standard for everyone you hire. Job advancement should only be offered with a demonstration of personal professional/career progress every year. We are at a time when there should be little tolerance for "cruising."

At the end of the day, all participants in your business development efforts must show a sincere interest in the clients' affairs and a sincere desire to help them. Everyone in your organization can contribute to business development. If your business is going to succeed and endure, the primary focus should always be on relationship building.

Authors Note: Highly recommended reading: *The Trusted Advisor*, by David Maister (Touchstone, 2000)

About the Author

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