
CLIENT LOYALTY: STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING INNER CIRCLE
RELATIONSHIPS
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Client Loyalty is a free, monthly newsletter written and published by Andrew Sobel, the leading authority on the skills and strategies required to build broad-based, enduring relationships with clients and customers. It is based on Andrew's research, writing, and popular workshops on developing long-term client relationships.
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THIS MONTH: HOW TO WIN A CLIENT IN 10 DAYS

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HOW TO WIN A CLIENT IN 10 DAYS

By Andrew Sobel

In almost every services market you can think of--consulting, accounting, law, banking, software, and so on--there is downward pressure on fees. Is this cyclical--are we experiencing the typical symptoms of corporations who are temporarily cost-conscious? Or are we seeing a secular, long-term shift in these markets—e.g., the use of procurement to buy services, increasing buyer sophistication, greater market transparency, and so on? Personally, I think the latter--although it doesn't really matter, because we don't control macro trends. What we CAN control is how we formulate our service offerings and then build and manage our client relationships.

So in this double issue of Client Loyalty, I'm going to describe some of the things you can do to strengthen your client franchise, framed as "How to Win a Client in 10 days." I admit that it's more likely to take ten weeks or ten months. But another way of thinking about these ten days' worth of suggestions is to consider doing one of them each day with a different client.

Day 1: Drop all the paper and start having a conversation with your client

Every day a whole forest is leveled somewhere just to provide paper for the long reports put together by service professionals. Desktop publishing technology and the modular nature of these documents means inexperienced individuals can, with little guidance, produce huge slide decks for any given meeting—in minutes! These documents can reduce rather than increase dialogue, they make clients passive listeners who glaze over after about ten minutes, and they put the emphasis on data and information rather than developing an understanding of what the client really thinks and feels. Try having some “paper” and “PC” free client meetings. Use paper documents as leave-behinds, and instead talk from a short outline of key points or draw spontaneously on a flip chart. You’ll look different than the competition, you’ll become quicker and better on your feet (which is where most advising occurs!), and you’ll connect more deeply with your clients.

Day 2: Use a hook to engage your client and earn the right to ask questions.

Time is everyone’s scarcest resource, and even if you’re on the payroll, so to speak, you have to earn the right to use that time. If the first page of a book doesn’t grab your attention, you usually put it down. Clients are no different: If they don’t feel there is a compelling reason to speak to you in the first place, they won’t make time for you, and if the first five minutes of the meeting don’t engage them, they’ll tune out. In communicating with your clients, lead off with a fact, conclusion, or implication that makes them want to listen. What’s going to motivate you to cock your ears: (A) “Today we’re going to review our findings from phase one of the revenue enhancement and churn reduction program. First, let’s review some of the methodologies we used in approaching this problem.” or (B) “We’ve discovered that customer churn is 25% higher than your internal analysis had indicated, and it’s costing you \$10 million a year”? The Beatles, for example, experimented in some cases with five or ten versions of a song before finally recording it—and the difference is mostly in the opening 4 or 5 measures—the guitar, piano, or bass lick that either grabs you or leaves your mind wandering. For your next meeting, think carefully: What are those initial measures of your song going to look like? What’s your hook?

Day 3: Pretend you’re independently wealthy.

Chuck Lillis, the former CEO of Media One, the giant cable company now part of Comcast, once said to me: “You know Andrew, I wish all of my professional advisors were independently wealthy. That’s because I would then know that they were putting my agenda first and telling it to me the way it really is.” Don’t we, in fact, listen more carefully to advice from someone we perceive as having no personal stake in the outcome? I’ve interviewed dozens of CEOs about their most trusted relationships, and many of them have told me, “Everyone who walks through that door over there wants something from me.” You’ll win your client over quickly if you can at least have the mindset of independent wealth. Go about your work like you genuinely enjoy it; treat clients the way you’d treat a peer or a friend; never, ever act like the meter is running;

and be fully prepared to walk away from an abusive or unethical client. This will give you an attractive aura that draws clients to you.

Day 4: Start acting like a deep generalist rather than simply an expert-for-hire.

Just last week I watched an executive vice president from a small but well known consulting firm give a presentation on strategic trends in a particular industry. He had 60 PowerPoint slides, and when he reached page 40 he stopped dead in his tracks. “I’m going to skip over this section,” he told the group. “These slides are on a segment of this industry that I don’t know very well, they’re not mine.” Please! If you’re a narrow expert, you’re a commodity—clients can invariably find 2 or 3 other experts to take your place. Deep generalists are harder to replace. What’s the difference? The expert is a specialist who delivers data and information, and who carefully (obsessively!) delineates where his expertise begins and ends. The deep generalist is usually also a specialist but she’s added breadth to her depth—she has layered on knowledge about the client’s organization and strategy, about the industry, and about the general business environment the client operates in. Deep generalists are able to connect their expertise to their clients’ strategy and goals. And they never say, “Those aren’t MY slides”

Day 5: Ask questions and listen—develop your empathy.

The great Spanish artist Pablo Picasso was asked by a journalist, back in the late 1960s, what he thought of the new mainframe computers. Picasso replied, “Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.” How many have the confidence and vision to ask the tough, provocative questions: “Why do you want to do this in the first place?” “Why do think the organization has been unable to solve this problem without outside help?”; “What business are you really in?”; or, “What will happen if you do nothing?” Remember what the great American poet Robert Frost said: “Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up.” Don’t just tell and give expert answers—learn to ask thought-provoking questions and to listen deeply.

Day 6: Help your client see the big picture

Another difference between the expert mindset and the advisor mindset is a focus on the big picture. Experts are great at analysis, but client advisors go further—they help their clients prioritize the issues, they see patterns in the data, and they ask thoughtful questions that can reframe the problem. The best way to get good at synthesis—big picture thinking—is to become a deep generalist who has a core specialty but also a broad knowledge of markets, industries, and the overall environment your clients operate in. Research on creativity, and my own studies of great client advisors, also show that *reflection* is critical here. Our best ideas come during a period of rest and reflection following intense work. Every so often you have to pull yourself out of the details and reflect. It could happen while listening to a concert, or even while taking a long shower.

Einstein, commenting on the sources of his great ideas, said, “The solitude of the countryside stimulated my creative thinking.”

Day 7: Develop greater personal trustworthiness.

For my most recent book, *Making Rain*, I interviewed a number of executives who started the conversation by saying, “Nowadays I’m wondering, whom can I really trust?” You need to gain a client’s trust in your expertise, but that’s just the start. Trust is based on four key factors. First, it requires integrity, which includes honesty, and on a day-to-day basis, consistency and reliability. Second, trust is based on competence. That may sound obvious, but the key word here is perceived competence. So, a client’s trust in you or your firm’s ability to tackle a particular problem will be in part based on how well you educate that client and position yourself. Third, a client’s trust will depend on your orientation: Are you focused on yourself and your agenda, or on the client, and his agenda? Finally, face time is critical to allow trust to grow. E-mail and conference calls are fine once you know someone, but they don’t build trust the way face to face contact does.

Day 8: Build a closer relationship through the key dimensions of likeability: PASFOR.

A great deal of scientific research has been done on why we feel comfortable with one person and not with another. Briefly, here are four of the six key drivers of personal comfort: 1: Praise. Everyone responds to praise, including our clients. Start out with what’s right, and only then talk about what needs to change! Reflecting this aspect of human nature, a Hollywood comedian once quipped, “My wife tricked me into marrying her by telling me that she liked me!” 2: Positive association. Clients will view you more positively—or negatively—depending on the associations with you and your firm. This is, of course, what’s behind high-paid celebrity endorsements. 3: Similarity. We are drawn to people with whom we feel we have things in common. So always be searching for common ground, whether it’s the college you and a client went to or the simple fact that you both have pre-school children (you can commiserate about the crayon drawings on the new wallpaper). 4: Familiarity. This ties back to face time and trust. We tend to like people and things we are familiar with. That’s why it’s important, even if you successfully conduct most of your business by phone or e-mail, to periodically meet face-to-face with each of your key clients.

Day 9: Add core value, surprise value, and personal value.

Core value is what the client formally contracts for—your “deliverables” or “outputs.” And you have to, well, deliver. But you need to go further, and provide what I call *surprise value*. The nature of this surprise value will of course vary depending on your profession and the type of contact you have with your clients. You might give your client

some suggestions about motivating and managing his executive team. You might identify a cost issue the client was unaware of. You might provide the client with important, proprietary market information, or make a valuable introduction. Then there's personal value. Every client who works with us is getting something personal out of the relationship. One client might be interested in learning about your methodologies. Another might need an introduction to someone in the local community that you know. A third might have a high school senior who wants to go to your alma mater. Clients really stand up and take notice when you go beyond "deliverables" and provide this *surprise* and *personal* value.

Day 10: Treat your client like it's day 1.

Baltasar Gracián, who was a famous 17th century Jesuit priest and advisor to Spanish noblemen, wrote a book of sayings called *The Oracle*. In it, he says, "You will be esteemed as long as you are new. Novelty pleases everyone because of its variety. A brand new mediocrity is more highly regarded than an extremely talented person to whom we have grown accustomed." How little human nature has changed in the last 400 years! If you want to keep your clients for life, you have to bring the same excitement, enthusiasm, and new ideas to the one-hundredth meeting that you brought to the first meeting when you were wooing him. If you don't, why would a client stick with you? One way to think about this is to pretend you are your competitor, and you want to steal this client away. What would your strategy be? Now, implement that strategy yourself.

I've sometimes thought that if married couples treated their spouses like newlyweds, the divorce rate would plummet! Complacency is the enemy of long-term client relationships.

Well, we've managed to rush through ten days in less than ten minutes of reading time! I'll leave you with a final quote from Gracián, that well-known 17th century advisor, that captures the spirit of the advisor mindset I've been trying to get across to you: "Princes like to be helped, but not surpassed. When you counsel someone, you should appear to be reminding him of something he had forgotten, not the light he was unable to see."

Andrew Sobel is the leading authority on client relationships and the skills and strategies required to earn enduring client loyalty. A noted business strategist, he is the author of the bestsellers *Making Rain: The Secrets of Building Lifelong Client Loyalty* (John Wiley & Sons) and *Clients for Life: Evolving from an Expert for Hire to an Extraordinary Advisor* (Simon & Schuster/Fireside). He speaks frequently to corporate groups on building long-term client relationships. Andrew can be reached at andrew@andrewsobel.com (Tel: 505.982.0211). His website, <http://www.andrewsobel.com>, contains additional articles on client relationships as well as back issues of this newsletter. ©2001, 2002, 2003 All rights reserved by Andrew

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