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CLIENT LOYALTY: STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING INNER CIRCLE RELATIONSHIPS
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Client Loyalty is a free, monthly newsletter published by Andrew Sobel, a leading authority on the skills and strategies required to build broad-based, long-term relationships with clients and customers. It is based on Andrew's research, writing, and popular workshops.

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This month: Growing Relationships—From the Client's Perspective

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GROWING RELATIONSHIPS—FROM THE CLIENT'S PERSPECTIVE

"We really don't need a lot of new client relationships," the chairman of a large professional services firm recently told me, adding, "We have a great client base already. There's huge potential to grow and develop our existing clients." Many companies feel the same way: That there is a large opportunity to deepen and broaden—to grow—their current clients. But what is the process by which this occurs? Over the last six months I have interviewed a number of C-level executives in a variety of Fortune 500 companies, and one of the questions I asked was, "What has characterized the relationships with outside professional firms, financial institutions, or other suppliers that have grown steadily over time?" Here are the key points—reinforced by other feedback I've gotten in many other client interviews—which these clients have made to me:

1. **"They've gotten to know me as a person."** When it comes to their business lives, executives care more about their careers than anything else, and as an independent advisor you can provide invaluable perspective in this area. To really serve your client well you have to understand him or her as a person. You have to become familiar with his or her goals, aspirations, fears, and values. In this vein, the head of worldwide business development for a major corporation told me, somewhat humorously, "If you had to call your client up on a Saturday, and his spouse answered, would you say, 'Can I please speak to my client' or would you know her name and be able to exchange pleasantries with her? The personal side of relationships is important."

2. **"They've built strong relationships throughout our organization."** I call this developing "many to many" relationships. It's not enough to have one very strong

relationship with someone you perceive to be the key decision maker—in larger organizations, you have to build a network of relationships, for a variety of reasons:

**Particularly in high-ticket sales situations, there are invariably many buying influences. You need to build relationships with the economic buyer (or buyers), user buyers, technical buyers, and other key influencers.

**When follow-on or additional work is being decided upon, the economic buyer will often be testing to see how widespread the support is for a particular provider. By building many to many relationships, you solidify that support.

**To get your recommendations accepted, it's often necessary to build consensus in the client's organization. You need a network of relationships to accomplish this.

**Sometimes, lower-level managers have large budgets or more decision-making authority than you think. The head of Europe for a major investment bank told me this story: "We have strong relationships with the CEO, CFO, and Treasurer at a long-standing client. A competitor of ours had a mid-level banker (an executive director) literally camp out next to the assistant treasurer for weeks on end. It turns out the assistant treasurer was the key decision-maker for a major convertible bond issue, which was awarded to our competitor. We missed this key relationship, and therefore lost a major piece of revenue."

3. **"They've done great work."** As the chairman of a European rail company said to me, "There is, after all, something to be said for just doing a great job! Isn't that the best recommendation?" There is a lot of talk about "cross-selling" (a term which I believe is antiquated and somewhat discredited by a lack of success), but it all has to start with a single professional or a small team that has established a trusted advisor relationship with the client and done a terrific job on the initial assignment.

4. **"They have delivered on their promise of being a global organization."** One client executive told me, "Many firms say they are 'global.' Most of them don't act like they are, however—they are introducing themselves to each other in the hallway outside my office right before the meeting! That's what I like about our current advisors—they have worked together for many years, and built up strong, internal relationships. They are able to deliver the global capability and not just talk about it." This goes back to the idea of building many to many relationships using a truly team approach with professionals who know each other, trust each other, and enjoy spending time together.

5. **"We feel very special, like we're one of their biggest, most important clients."** Everyone wants to feel like they are special and important, and no-one wants to feel like they are just one among hundreds or thousands. One client said to me, "I know we're not that large, but we feel special, like the entire organization would be available to us if it were needed." How do you instill this feeling in your clients? I think it comes from doing many different things—being totally focused on that client when you are with her, staying in touch frequently, occasionally introducing other expert resources from within

your own firm, getting to know them as people (point 1, above), adding both core and surprise value, and so on.

6. "**They stay in touch regularly."** In my experience, many professionals are weak at staying in touch, especially if there isn't a lot going on with a client at that moment. A client of mine—himself a superb relationship builder—likes to say that "If you talk to a client once a day you have lots to talk about—the conversation can go on forever; if you talk every few months, you have nothing to talk about." In addition to staying in touch regularly and sending your client relevant articles, ideas, introductions, and so on, think about taking the occasional "deep dive"—do some research and serious thinking around a topic of special interest to your client, and structure a substantive meeting around it. Many clients have told me that a well thought-out "deep dive" into an important subject can often be the catalyst for additional work.

7. **"They keep the ideas coming."** The CFO of a major telecommunications company told me, "All these things are important—building a personal relationship, creating many points of contact, and so on—but in the end, they have to deliver, they have to keep up a steady supply of ideas and perspectives in order to sustain the loyalty and keep the relationship fresh." This goes to a practice I often preach about, which is treating old clients like new clients.

The ingredients required to grow client and customer relationships are really not all that baffling or obscure: Do great work, get to know your clients as people, be creative about staying in touch regularly, build many to many relationships, make each client feel special, invest in building face time and trust—internally—so your organization can truly mobilize around each client, and keep up a steady flow of valuable ideas and perspectives. The real knack, of course, is having the dogged discipline to do these things week-in, week-out!

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Andrew Sobel is the leading authority on client relationships and the skills and strategies required to earn enduring client loyalty. He is a consultant and educator to professional service firms and financial institutions worldwide. He is the author of the business bestsellers *Making Rain: The Secrets of Building Lifelong Client Loyalty* (Wiley & Sons), and *Clients for Life: How Great Professionals Develop Breakthrough Relationships* (Simon & Schuster/Fireside). He can be reached at andrew@andrewsobel.com (Tel: 505.982.0211).