

STRONGER

Relationships with Your Clients

Establish trust by paying attention to the "softer side"

by Ed Wertzberger and Marly Heidkamp

Do you know what relationship factors are most important when building and maintaining relationships with your key executive-level customers?

How can you make them happy and keep them happy?

To find out, we interviewed more than 100 senior executives from mid- and large-size organizations. The executives told us what is important to them in building trusting relationships, how to differentiate from the competition and current ideas of need within the organization. Note: This should not be confused with the typical customer satisfaction survey/interview, which tends to look in the rear-view mirror. As one executive stated, "Good service doesn't always equate with a good relationship."

We found that these decision-makers are significantly influenced by the "softer side." Factors such as trust, experience, competence, quality and responsiveness are far more important than professional credentials, resumes and customer testimonials. The executives expect you to be credible and capable; they view that as a baseline expectation, not as a differentiator. To get in the door, the baseline expectations will be reviewed – often by middle management. Once you're on to talking to the executive decision-makers, it's assumed that you've passed that test. So put down your fancy brochures and your snazzy power-point presentations – the marketing stage is over. Focus on trust-building and the needs of the executive.

It is important to understand that it is not enough to simply know what the most important relationship factors are for decision-makers. Each executive must be treated as an individual with unique needs and expectations. During our interviews, we asked the executives to define each of the relationship factors (trust, experience, competence, quality and responsiveness). Consider responsiveness. Each executive defined it differently: "Calls me back within two hours," "Contacts me by the next business day," "Proactively contacts me regarding new information that impacts my business."

Knowing the important relationship factors is just the first step. After that, you must determine how each of the individuals you're dealing with defines and measures those factors. How do you do this? The old fashioned way – ask them. And when you ask, you get an answer, thereby establishing an expectation. Listen, learn and implement – that's how you strengthen the relationship.

Two other vital nuggets we learned from the executives we interviewed – beware of inherited relationships and don't confuse competency with trust.

As they make their way up the corporate ladder, executives become seasoned relationship builders. When they have a problem or need, the new executives will look to a known and trusted service provider. Focusing on the high quality of your products and services and your vast experience will not differentiate you from the known and trusted service provider. However, new executives can be heavily influenced by others in their organizations. Have you invested the time and energy in building trusting relationships with other members of the executive's



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team? And remember – the previous executives, unless they've retired, probably moved on to another company. Have you thought about how you can continue to maintain that strong trusting relationship at the new company?

The executives we interviewed told us that they want to be heard and understood. They want to feel that their issues and needs are the first and foremost priorities; they look for trusted business advisors who can truly help their businesses succeed and prosper. Again – they don't want to hear your marketing pitch. Build confidence with the executives by addressing their specific needs and laying the foundation on which to build that trusting relationship.

Following are some of the suggestions from the executives on how to approach them and gain their trust:

- Make sure you fully understand the customer's needs. And don't just focus on the project at hand; think longer term.

- Find out what the customers expect from the suppliers with which they do business. By asking about this, you'll often glean competitive intelligence by getting the customer to compare and contrast the services of other suppliers.

- While the customers know that you cannot be all and do all for them, you can offer referrals and recommendations. This demonstrates a deeper level of commitment and thus builds stronger relationships.

Don't be afraid to ask customers and prospects these questions about how they make decisions regarding service providers:

- How will you decide with whom you'll do business?

- Who else, if anyone, is involved in the decision?

- What factors are important to you when deciding on a service provider?

- What are your company's most urgent issues?

- How important is responsiveness to you?

- How can I demonstrate that I am responsive to your needs?

- How else can we help you beyond the issues we currently are addressing for you?

Always get as much clarity around each question asked. That will help you understand how you can demonstrate to customers your ability to meet their expectations, which will go a long way in earning their trust in you and your company.

We found during our interviews with executives that they were very willing to freely answer those questions and elaborate on them. If customers or prospects honestly are interested in doing business with you, they will respond to these types of questions; they'll see it as a way to build trust. When they decline to answer these questions, you're looking at a "vendor relationship" at best and not a trusting relationship.

Building trust is a journey, and because each customer has unique needs and expectations, the journey takes time and effort. Be on your way by focusing on confidence-building and paying attention to the softer side. ■

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