



Building Client Relationships: *7 Easy Steps*

By Suzanne Saxe E.D.

The new economy demands that today's companies must deliver top-notch customer service to get client's business. It's not just a quality product that lands the deal anymore - you need to understand your client's issues, speak their language and build relationships that get clients in the door and keep them coming back for more. But how? Below are seven easy steps that can help build successful client relationships and boost the chances for positive results every time.

1. It's all in the attitude: Exude positive confidence.

Take a minute and think of those people in your life who motivate you, make you feel excited, passionate and help you to be creative and the best person you can be. You walk away from encounters with these people feeling energized, happy, and optimistic about new possibilities. You feel like you have been given a positive energy booster that propels you forward.

Now, become that energy giver--the motivator. Look for ways to focus on positive outcomes with your clients and team members. Give positive feedback before suggestions for improvement. Frame problems with a focus on solutions. Many of us are usually positive, but we all run into situations or people who sap our energy and make us feel defeated and negative. During these times it is important to get yourself out of the "funk" and into a feeling of power and confidence that you can make a difference. To reduce the "funk" factor, share your thoughts and get them down on paper. As an exercise, write down your feelings. Now tear the paper up and throw it in the trashcan. Now, what feelings do you have when the thought (and paper) are gone--shredded, never to be seen again? How do you feel now? More powerful? Hopeful? Excited? Hold on to the new feelings and new possibilities.

With a genuinely excited, self-assured attitude, you will start to attract different people and achieve different, better responses from your clients. Your regained power, truth, and positive energy will re-energize and influence others and they will respond in wonderful new ways.

2. Get in the comfort zone: Develop rapport and intimacy with your client.

People often wonder, "How can I develop a successful relationship with my clients when we are so very different?" The answer here is by building rapport and intimacy.

Rapport is the ability to make others feel comfortable with you. This starts at the beginning of each interaction with a smile, handshake and direct eye contact, as well as knowing their name, something about their business issues, and their organization and industry. Every interaction you have with the client is an opportunity to build rapport. Match what they are wearing (such as business casual or suit and-tie). Find some non-

business topic you both like to discuss. Share something personal about yourself or talk about someone you both know. Ask questions and listen before jumping in.

Creating intimacy with your clients means taking the next step toward a more honest relationship. It requires some caution, some courage, and the willingness to be vulnerable as well. Remember the first time a new friend asked you to keep a secret? How proud you were, how good you felt that your friend trusted you, and how hard it was to keep the secret. But somehow you knew that to keep the relationship intact and intimate, keeping the secret was important. Creating intimacy is a dance that is not choreographed for you. You have to feel your way along, but the rewards can be well worth the effort. Here are simple suggestions on creating intimacy with your clients:

- **Be courageous.** Take a risk and share what you are observing, thinking, or wondering. If done sincerely, your chances of it being accepted are great. Once you share, others are often more open to the idea of also sharing intimately with you, and thereby giving you more information with which to help them.
- **Get to know people.** The more you know someone, the better your chances that you can be honest with each other and challenge each other's thinking.
- **Tap into the heart.** Focus not only on the analytical processes involved in making decisions, but also the heartfelt, emotional components. Do this by asking questions that tap into the client's emotional side, the part that is most important to them. An example is asking; "What is most important to you about this? What are your biggest concerns?"
- **Pick "the moment."** Think through the best time to bring up a more intimate topic. When would the client be more receptive and honest? Where is the best setting for such a conversation? Prepare how you might open up the conversation, either through observations or questions.
- **Practice.** Like all other important conversations, presentations, or meetings, prepare and practice with others before you go forward.

3. Promote and maintain trust: Adopt a win-win approach.

Trust is a warm, comfortable, embracing feeling. It's one of those genuinely instinctive feelings in life--we simply know when we trust someone and when we don't. Different individuals each have a high, medium, or low trust level of others that is borne of their own background and experience. If you are lucky, you work with others who start with high trust and then it is up to you to build on their good nature. On the other hand, there are many clients in the world who have a low trust level, who have been hurt in the past, and we have to work hard at winning their trust.

Either way, there are building blocks to developing and keeping trust. Focus on these building blocks to help you develop those successful client relationships:

- **Credibility.** This includes experience, expertise, insights, and how these qualities are communicated. Beyond degrees, certificates and client testimonials, think about how you can enhance your credibility beyond the role of technical expert. Learn as much as you can about the client's business, strategies, and issues and show great interest in helping them to solve their business problem.

- **Reliability.** Do what you say you are going to do. Clients should be able to depend on you 100% and trust that you will follow through as discussed (or assumed). Reliability is proven with each interaction by your fulfilling every agreed or assumed promise. Find opportunities to demonstrate your reliability as often as possible. The more reliable you are, the more clients will trust you and forgive you if something falls through the cracks, or worse, fails to meet expectations.
- **Responsiveness.** Clients feel that they are paying for a certain level of responsiveness. For example, do they expect a phone call to be returned in 1 hour, 24 hours, or 3 days? Since everyone has a different need, it is important to understand your clients' expectations. Let your clients know what they can expect from you and negotiate from there. This way you are setting the bar and preventing miscommunication.
- **Emotional connection.** Trust is not built on rational reasoning and thinking alone, but also relies to a great degree on a connection with the heart and spirit. How willing are you to listen to the emotional side of decisions, issues, and ideas? For example, do you ask your client to share personal thoughts, ideas, and questions related to the issues at hand? If you believe the client is having second thoughts about your project, ask her to share her concerns and talk about what she is feeling. By doing this you are creating intimacy, including the heart and spirit -- and building trust.
- **Win-win relationship.** Your clients want to know that your motivations include their best interests as well as taking care of yourself. The key to creating a win-win situation is to always focus on the client. Be interested. Be curious. Be clear through your actions about how both you and the client will benefit. Conveying an attitude that you can make a difference will ring loudly for the client at this point.

4. Say What's So! Develop open and complete communication.

Think back to those relationships in school, especially high school. Remember when you wanted to tell someone how you really felt but didn't? Those relationships rarely went anywhere, or worse, perhaps became abusive.

It's important to be open and complete in your communication with the goal of making the relationship the best it can be. For example, if you notice a client is dissatisfied with a deliverable, do you ignore it and hope it will go away? Do you hope someone else will bring it up? Do you say something like... "I am noticing that you are not entirely pleased with the deliverable. Give me feedback and let's see what we can do to meet your expectations." Saying what's so means being courageous and open enough to state what you are thinking and being open to the response.

By creating an opportunity for open and complete communication, you won't be walking around wondering what went wrong, or why they didn't ask you for a proposal for the next project. You won't be avoiding them on the street because secretly you knew that something was wrong.

5. Make it easy to work with you: Be service oriented.

The #1 unstated expectation that clients have is "make it easy for us to work with you." It's a simple statement, yet so many companies and individuals make it difficult to work with them.

Are your policies, procedures and processes customer-oriented? Do they keep the client in mind? Or are they internally focused and only a way to punish clients? Once a year, if not more frequently, examine your processes, policies, and ways of interacting with clients and rate them on a scale as client friendly (+), neutral (0), or internally focused (-). For all those processes, procedures, and policies that are internally focused or neutral, think of ways that you could make them client-friendly while still meeting your needs. For example, can you provide services on Saturday for no additional fee but take the following Monday off in return? If you don't offer a service they need, can you help to find what they need through other vendors you partner with?

Remember it only takes one negative service experience for customers to leave your company, whereas it takes up to nine positive experiences for anyone to hear about it. Focus on service and make it easy to work with you and your organization

6: Help your clients win: Produce the desired results.

Clients engage us to help them get results. This results focus is sometimes lost in the shuffle of "doing the work." Get specifics from your clients. Ask them and everyone around them, "What does success look like?" How can you help them measure the results? How can you help them sustain results and even get additional value? If you truly understand what success looks like, you will have a much better chance of helping your client win and get the desired results

7. Embrace challenge: Be passionate and fun to be with.

If most of us were asked the question, "Would you prefer to be with a happy, passionate person or an unhappy boring person?" we would answer "A happy, passionate person", of course! Well, the question is, how passionate are you when you are with your clients? Are you upbeat and excited about working with them or do you carry the worries of the world on your shoulders? This principle cycles back to your attitude, but with a twist. When you are passionate and fun you are usually willing to share, collaborate, break through with new ideas, and provide the best you have to offer. If you cannot bring yourself to be passionate and fun to be with, it is a clear sign that your life is out of balance in some way and you're not doing what's right for you. The only realistic choice then is to make an immediate life change and save yourself and your clients the agony.

If you find that you need just a little lift in this area, think about doing something different that will energize you -- and it doesn't have to be work-related. Take a dance class, go fishing, swim in your local pool, paint, do some gardening, go to a comedy club, spend time with your children, nieces and nephews, or your pets. Play like you did when you were in kindergarten and stop taking yourself so seriously. Life is fun if you are fully

present in the moment and your mind is not running your life. Rebalance so that your passion flows again.

Clients are people too, and want to be with those who not only generate exciting ideas and results, but also who bring sunshine into their often chaotic, pressured lives. Remember the song refrain, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." What is the personal theme song your clients associate with you?

To summarize, the 7 steps:

- Positive attitude
- Intimacy and rapport
- Trust
- Open and complete communication
- Ease to work with -- service orientation
- Helping to win
- Passionate and fun

If, over time, some of these steps may have eroded, gotten rusty or forgotten, it's time to shine them up again. Because without these steps as the foundation in client relationships, you will undermine your own success and business results in multiple ways. Take a look in the mirror and see if you can rediscover some of these foundation principles, put them into action and enjoy the results!!

For more information about this article or how Advance Consulting, Inc. can assist you in developing your people as consultants and business partners, contact us at advanceinfo@advanceconsulting.com or 415.927.5401.