

Building Relationships to Gain Momentum with New and Existing Clients

Whatever your role, internal or external consultant, manager, team leader, or team member—your success is dependent upon your ability to nurture and develop relationships with others (both inside and outside of your organization). The days of resting on the laurels of previous projects or results once achieved are over. Today, your ability to build successful business relationships directly impacts customer retention, account acquisition, growth, and even job security.

With hectic schedules and heavy workloads, focusing on building relationships and keeping your eyes and ears open for new opportunities may fall to the wayside. To get back on track we suggest you focus some time and energy to gain momentum in the following areas:

- **Establishing Credibility**
- **Building Your Network**
- **Understanding Business Needs and Goals**
- **Delivering Results**
- **Provide Exceptional Service**

Establishing Credibility

Establishing credibility involves more than having the right credentials or impressive degrees hanging on your wall. In today's competitive business environment, these are considered basic qualifications—they are expected and they do not automatically establish credibility. Nowadays, credibility is something that is earned and once you have it, you can have more productive discussions around issues and solutions. Establishing credibility takes dedication and determination. Below are a few areas we suggest you focus on that will help you establish your credibility:

- **Increase your customer competence:** Knowing your clients business issues and pains will help you establish your credibility. Do research before you meet with your client. Understanding the link between your services and your client's business strategy and needs will help you create a winning value proposition and establish credibility.
- **Develop effective communication & listening skills:** Communication plays an integral part in developing business relationships and credibility. Your ability to listen and communicate effectively enhances your ability to quickly establish rapport and credibility.
- **Maintain your visibility:** You can increase your credibility by improving the visibility of your business performance. Get the word out on your successes—turn project data into summarized, usable information. Use testimonials, write-up a success story, white paper or contribute an article to your company's or your client's newsletter.

- **Demonstrate your expertise:** Your clients want to know that you are a guru in your field. You can demonstrate your expertise by sharing your experience, your findings, and how what you've learned applies to your client's situation.

*“Credentials get you in the door
and tying your solution to their needs
establishes credibility.”*

Building Your Network

With customer expectations increasing, products and solutions becoming more complex and customer retention becoming more crucial, the need for a strong network both internally and externally is essential. Networking is an art and to be effective it must be planned and approached with a “can do” attitude. Quality networking only happens when we build supportive, personal relationships.

Below are a few ideas to help build your business network:

1. **Create and use cross-functional relationships** (across teams; across departments) to accomplish work objectives, as well as connect team members to the organization and encourage them to communicate beyond their own team.
2. **Create supporters:** Identify the people, both internal to your area and external, whose support you need to develop or implement both short term and long term solutions. (Look beyond the titles of employees to identify key contacts within departments that are or may be relevant to your work.)
3. **Keep up old relationships:** Keep track of those with whom you have worked before and those you have not. Make a list of individuals that you need to build a better relationship with and try to enlist their support in a follow up project.
4. **Join a professional association.** Attend meetings and become actively involved. Professional associations can be a great place for networking, getting fresh ideas, having a place to connect with others who are doing similar work and acquiring new leads for business development and jobs.
5. **Join a committee or workgroup.** Prepare a presentation for the group.
6. **Attend presentations given by your colleagues.** Attend seminars or meetings that clients and colleagues participate in as learners and presenters. Support others who are presenting their ideas and learn from them. Create peer coaching groups to help each other both within and outside your company.
7. **Ask for referrals.** Ask your clients who they know that might be interested in your services. Once a client knows your work and trusts you they are more than willing to refer you to others. The key is to be specific on with whom you want a referral to and ask them to make an introduction by phone or email. This could be a specific person or a specific title such as VP of IT or CIO. And of course, follow-up is key! 90% of business is built through referrals and networking. This same method applies to internal as well as external clients.

*“90% of business is built
through referrals and networking.”*

Understanding Business Needs and Goals

Understanding the business needs and goals of your clients is an integral part of building business relationships. This involves not only uncovering your customers' needs, wants, and concerns but also understanding the overall business strategy and goals. To do so we suggest you:

Listen to their needs and pains. Conduct interviews or focus groups with clients to find out what your clients really want and need. This will help you determine the demand for your group's services. Ask questions to help uncover future needs and strategies. Once you have asked the question, sit back and LISTEN. Listen to themes, pains, and key priorities.

Ask for their thoughts. Interview key clients to determine how your expertise can most effectively support their goals. Focus on gaining insight to their perspectives on issues that may be relevant in doing work for them.

Ask for feedback. Make a list of all the internal and external clients you or your team serve. Next to each one list what type of services you provide. Identify the three most important internal and external clients. Set up regular meetings with them to discuss their level of satisfaction and project progress. Ask for specific examples of what you are doing well and what you need to improve on.

Be an observer. Attend business planning and tracking meetings as an observer. This will help you develop your perspective on what specific departments and teams need to achieve. Anytime you are in a meeting, pay attention to the issues, pains, and needs and determine if there might be some way you could provide solution ideas or expertise.

*“Question, Listen, Question, Listen, Question, Listen....
and then respond.”*

Delivering Results

Your ability to deliver results can either make or break your business relationships. Your clients come to you because they trust that you can deliver on your promises. To ensure that you will be successful in providing effective solutions remember to:

- **Create work agreements between you and your primary client or team members.** This will help to clarify what you will be doing, how you will be working together and the results you are expected to produce. The work agreement summarizes, not only, objectives, roles, responsibilities, resources, and deliverables, but also how you are going to communicate and success criteria. It ensures that understanding and commitment among all parties.

- **Involve your client when generating solutions and ideas.** Ask them what does success look like to you? How can I help you measure the results? What needs to happen to ensure success? What do you feel will be the biggest challenges to implementing the solution?
- **Tie your recommendations to achieving business results.** Your recommendations should address the client's business and personal objectives and concerns. Be prepared to justify the costs and benefits for your recommendations and speak in the client's terms.

*The number one question to ask your client is,
"What does success look like?"*

Provide Exceptional Service

To retain and attract new customers not only do you need to deliver results, but you must also deliver a positive work experience. The customer relationship goes far beyond landing the sale – the daily interactions your service and internal groups have with the customer are critical to building and keeping the relationship strong. Here are some things to help you create and deliver a positive experience for your clients:

- **Be easy to work with.** You don't want to make working with you a difficult experience. Have processes in place that are service oriented. Find out what it is like to be your customer. Put yourself in their place and identify ways to improve your processes.
- **Ask for feedback and follow through.** Find out how you can exceed your client's expectations. Ask them how you can improve the way in which you work together. To find out what your customers really think about you--email them, call them, do surveys and visit them. A debrief conversation after key objectives have been met are critical.
- **Identify ways to delight your customers.** This involves going above and beyond their expectations. Send a thank you note, send articles of interest, provide a free webinar to educate their folks or simply do a nice gesture and take them a latte one early morning.
- **Encourage your team to go the extra mile.** Reward those who create a positive customer encounter and have consequences for those who do not. Talk about the customer experience and how you are consulting with your clients during staff meetings. Get team members to share and coach each other on what they have done that has made a difference.
- **Resolve client complaints quickly and effectively.** Upset clients are part of every business and project. How you deal with a complaint is what makes a difference. Remember to apologize for their inconvenience, empathize and finally focus on positive actions. Acquire skills in managing the client interactions, resistance and conflict. The more that each person is empowered and does not have to escalate issues, the better the customer experience.

*“Every customer interaction is a moment of truth
when a customer walks away feeling positive or negative.
Make your moments count.”*

It is easy to get lost in the work at hand and lose momentum in focusing on new opportunities and building relationships. However by incorporating some of these ideas into your daily work you will be able to keep your eye out for new opportunities and your clients will continue to turn to you when they have a problem or seek advice.

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.