

THE ART OF M CLIENT RELATI A BALANCING



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• BY TOM KOSNIK •



The essence of the art of mastering client relationships lies between being in a certain space before your client arrives, and then interacting with that client as if you don't care whether or not your client goes with another vendor. It takes a lot of smarts to be in the business model places where your client will eventually arrive. It takes a lot of character to proceed with a client, acting 100% in the client's best interest. If a vendor can fully intuit the essence of the art of mastering client relationships, the results will be productive.

The Basics of What Clients Want

At the most basic level, clients want quality, speed and money. Buyer surveys get conducted year after year after year, and the results are consistent. You can look through the data that Staffing Industry Analysts has collected. Clients want high-quality contractors or temporaries, in a fairly quick time frame and for a good price. Vendors, if they want to master client relationships, have to be able to succeed with clients on this basic level of quality, speed and money. This means that the fulfillment function of the supplier has to be fully functioning and effective.

Clients want professional interaction with vendors. Clients want good follow up: vendors that do what they say they are going to do, problem solving, suggestions and recommendations for improvement, ethical interaction, etc. High-powered sales reps slamming deals through, recruiters over communicating with hiring managers, sales reps who pester, service staff who mother clients are all practices that neon flashing sign show that a supplier is not acting in the clients' best interest. If a vendor wants to succeed with client relationships, they have to behave and conduct business in a professional manner.

Clients want vendors that have the ability to conduct ongoing discovery. A client's business model, needs, competitive threats, cash flow, challenges and much more are in constant flux. A client's business needs will be different from one quarter to the next. It is the nature of business. A vendor cannot fully service a client if the vendor is not in

a consistent mode of ongoing discovery. Quality checks are helpful: "Did my temp show up? Are you happy with the temp?" Email surveys and mail-in surveys are worthless. If a vendor wants to succeed with client relationships, a practice of professional ongoing discovery has to occur.

Therefore, at the "basic level," to succeed with mastering client relationships, a vendor has to deliver on (a) quality, speed and money, (b) professional interaction and (c) ongoing discovery. This is just to get a place at the table.

Being in a Certain Space Before the Client Arrives

Is your company a contingent staffing subject matter expert? A very simple question, closed ended. Yes or No – what is it? Look yourself in the mirror and answer honestly.

We know that clients have difficulty hiring employees and staffing projects. The staffing industry would not exist if clients could outperform us. Our clients' hiring needs have nothing to do with their capabilities to succeed. They simply have a thousand other more pressing items on their plates. Staffing is just one of the many responsibilities, not their core competency. Staffing is not how their business model makes money. So, they look to outside firms, who have mastered the art of staffing, who are subject matter experts, to perform this task of staffing.

To secure mastering client relationships a vendor must first "know" the client. This may appear to be self-evident. However, egos and commission rewards get involved, and often the client and the client's needs get usurped by the desire to close the deal and make the buck.

Knowing the clients begins by asking a lot of questions about how their business model makes money. Let me say it again: ... about how their business model makes money. In the end, if I cannot help the client become more efficient, more competitive, more profitable, then I am worthless to my client. It is a plain and simple fact. Welcome to Capitalism 101. Business exists to create wealth. In order for my staffing firm to add true value, I have to "know" the client's business model and how they make money, how they create wealth.

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Most sales teams are trained to focus on the "pain." Find where the pain is. Address these pain points. Show how your staffing firm can take away their pain. This all sounds great, but it is fleeting. Focusing on the pain points is tactical, temporary and short-term. Truly knowing clients is focused on long-term results: "Let me show you how I can assist you in making more money in your business model."

Clients commoditize us. Clients squeeze our margins. Clients tell us what to do, how to act, which software to use. Cry, cry, cry!

Subject matter experts aren't told what to do. Vendors that "know" their clients don't get commoditized. Knowing a client's business model is so important because you can never advise a client on how to become more profitable if you don't know the client's business model and how the client makes money and creates wealth.

The first step then is: Know your client, and know how they make money. The second step is: Educate your clients and show them the options;

teach them how a particular staffing service model can make more money for them.

The essence of the art of mastering client relationships is being in these staffing business model spaces before your clients arrive. And they will eventually arrive there. But you have to lead your clients to these spaces and places. That is, if you want to be a subject matter expert and differentiated from the competition, and not a commodity and not told what to do, where to go and what your margins are going to be. Sound familiar?

The Hell with You, Go with Another Vendor

It sounds more brutal than what I actually mean. Have you ever said to a buyer, "Whether you use my services or not, you need to know this..." or "Whether you use my services or not, you need to proceed in this fashion..." or "The best advice I can give you is to interview with a couple of other staffing services."

There is an interesting dynamic that occurs with a customer when you proceed as if you do not need the business. You become more valuable. I don't understand the psychology of it all but it works. And the working of it depends less upon the client and more upon your disposition with the client.

The essence of the art of mastering client relationships is interacting with clients as if you don't care if a client goes with another vendor. What I mean here is that the vendor is acting 100% in the best interest of the client. This is where the dynamic works in favor of the vendor.

If a vendor really wants their client to succeed, it will be willing to let the client go. It will be willing to let the client interview with other staffing firms. The vendor does not have a lock on the client. The vendor does not own the relationship but rather views the relationship from a true service disposition.

Why is it so painfully difficult for us to buy a bottle of water in the airport for \$4.00? Why is it so painfully difficult for us to buy a beer at the ballpark for \$7.00? Because we know we are getting economically taken. The supplier has all the power over us.

Our choice is extremely limited. We cannot go anywhere else to acquire that bottle of water or that beer. We have to pay the price. It is a very uncomfortable position to be in regardless of how rich or poor we might be.

This same dynamic works in our vendor/client relationships. A client knows intuitively if we are acting in their best interest. A client knows intuitively if we are fully advising in a professional and ethical manner, offering all the data, options and solutions possible. It is a human trait, a sixth sense. We all have it. So, why do we proceed with clients as if they don't have it? This is insulting to a client.

It takes character to proceed with a client as if you do not need the business. It takes strength, stamina and courage to be in an advisory mode with the client. There is no play-acting here. Either you act in the best interest of the client or you don't. And your client picks up on it. No questions

asked. Clients are not stupid. They know if another is advising or acting in their best interest.

Here is how it stands with clients, "The hell with you" really means, "I'm here to make you succeed. That may include you, Mr. Client, purchasing some services from me, and it may not. I am an expert in this space, and I can potentially assist you in succeeding. But can I ask you some questions?" It is the disposition, the state you assume when in an interaction with a client. It is genuine and authentic.

The essence of the art of mastering client relationships lies between being in a space before your clients arrive and then interacting with them as if you don't care whether they go with another vendor. It takes smarts and character. And this is your differentiator. **si**

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