

Creating a Unique Client Experience

By Andrew Sobel

In many markets, we are seeing a fundamental shift in the way value is created for clients and customers. The shift is from value that resides in the product or service to value that is created for the customer during the experience of interacting with the service provider. Increasingly, it is at the points of interaction where value is created, not in the factory or R&D laboratory. In the consumer market, think of the truly special experience of browsing in an Apple retail store, or the high-end lounges that airlines like Lufthansa and British Airways have created to augment the in-air experience with a luxurious on-the-ground experience.

This phenomenon is poised to dramatically affect the world of professional services. Most firms say they offer a unique client experience, but few actually do. The challenge is to create new, refreshing, and valuable client interactions which become part of the total package of your value-added. The issue is that most professional services are delivered today in almost exactly the same way as they were forty years ago. There is more on-site work, for sure, but still very little client involvement in defining the desired relationship experience.

Here are some examples of how firms have taken steps to tailor and differentiate the relationship experience. The ultimate goal is to add more value through the relationship experience itself, reduce risk for both sides, and decrease the overall cost of doing business together:

- **Client Forums:** The world's leading environmental consulting firm sponsors a 3-day intensive forum that brings together a group of Environmental Directors to share best practices and discuss critical industry issues. Professionally facilitated, it resembles an executive MBA program or alumni college as opposed to the golfing boondoggles that many firms put on. The sessions are so popular there is a waiting list to attend—they turn clients down for each forum.
- **Joint Business Development:** A telecommunications services company uses a joint strategic planning session as the basis for developing any new business proposal. Rather than sitting in their office to write a proposal, their executives do it jointly with the client during the course of a value-added workshop.
- **Simulations:** A law firm created a simulated trial for a non-US client that was considering going to court rather than settling a major lawsuit. The simulation included a judge, jury, and courtroom spectators, and allowed the client to experience first-hand what they would face during the litigation. A large consulting firm developed a powerful war-gaming capability for the US government, which they have subsequently used with private-sector corporations to simulate strategic options and the resultant market share gains and losses. For a client's leadership team, participating in this three-day exercise is an intense, unique experience.
- **Customizing an Entire Firm:** A large marketing services company won a major computer maker's worldwide advertising and marketing business—and in the process replace 800 smaller firms they had been using around the globe—by actually creating a dedicated agency staffed by 1000 professionals.
- **Expectations Setting:** A big-4 accounting firm uses a unique expectations-setting process with its clients called a “strategic enablement” discussion. During this meeting, a partner works with the client to define what success will look like; what the client's expectations are for the relationship; how the first year of an audit or tax engagement will typically progress; and what, overall, the client can expect from the firm.
- **Giving Pricing Control to Clients:** Some professional firms have given their clients a degree of control over pricing, for example by creating a 15% “holdback” of fees which are paid based on satisfaction with the work done. There are no complicated metrics, no tracking of specific results—satisfaction in this case is defined qualitatively by the client.
- **Creating a New Business Model for Service Delivery:** Some firms, such as Bain & Company in

consulting and Egon Zehnder in executive search, have developed new delivery models which altered the client relationship experience and increased client value. When it was founded in the 1970s, Bain differentiated itself from McKinsey and BCG by extending its work into implementation; and Egon Zehnder created his firm by overturning many of the traditional foundations of executive search, such as the use of success fees (he believed that a fixed fee better aligned his and the client's interests) and a one-firm measurement and reward policy.

- **Joint client account planning.** Most annual account planning exercises are one-sided. They are done by the client service team, and tend to be divorced from the client's own agenda. Some firms conduct joint account planning sessions, where they go to the client and say "We are doing our planning for next year, and want to make sure we have the right resources focused on serving you. We'd like to sit down and make sure we understand your plans and potential needs going forward, and also share with you some ideas we've developed for your business and get your reactions to them."
- **Using Virtual Experience Environments:** Many firms are experimenting with virtual experience environments, using Linden Lab's Second Life virtual world to interview job candidates, conduct training seminars, hold workshops, and test market new products and services.

These examples illustrate some of the main pathways that you can explore in order to design a unique client experience. Specifically, you need to ask yourself questions around four areas:

1. **Dialogue:** Are there opportunities to increase the amount of dialogue with clients? You need to push yourself to think about new lines of communications and new interactions that would enhance a client's (and your) understanding of the issues and their perspective on the problem.
2. **Network and Access:** Could you involve new players in the relationship—from your firm, the client's organization, and other constituencies? This could include getting your client's leadership more involved in your engagement, new and different colleagues from your firm, or even outsiders that can bring unique perspectives (industry experts, academics, your client's customers, etc.).
3. **Transparency:** Could you make some of your work processes and decisions more transparent to the client (and to your own staff)? Transparency increases trust, and it enhances a client's perception of value. Think about all of the different aspects of your business development and delivery process, and see if there are some that could be done jointly or more collaboratively with the client.
4. **Experience:** Are there opportunities to create new experiences and new experience environments for the client? Studies have shown that getting into new environments with people can enhance feelings of likeability and trust. Can you hold a meeting offsite instead of in the usual conference room? Could you go have a cup of coffee with your client down the street rather than sit in their office? Can you turn what would normally be a one-way "sales pitch" into a highly collaborative experience for your client? Think about ways to change and enhance the experience environments in which you and your client interact.

The goal should be to have your client say, "Working with them really is different!"

Conclusion

The final ingredients of trusted client partnerships are focus and confidence. These large-scale relationships cannot be developed on a haphazard basis—they require dedicated professionals and extensive firm-level support in order to prosper. Confidence in your capabilities is also essential. I have seen Level 6 relationships developed by very small firms and also very large ones; by market leaders and by unknown upstarts. The first sale is to yourself, and if you believe that you belong in the c-suite and that your firm should be your client's most important advisor, then you've already won half the battle. If you don't believe these things, why should your clients?