When Do You Know Your Client Relationship Is Truly Strong?

By Michael T. Buell, FSMPS, CPSM, Assoc. DBIA

As tenured business development professionals, we know very well that our primary job is to position our A/E/C firms for project work that can lead to successful engagements and outcomes. What we do each day to create these opportunities involves a myriad of strategic and personal efforts that affect our firms' bottom lines. Let's look at the how and why of business development.

I've often shared that the number-one criterion for a productive business development effort is hit rate. Meaning, what percentage of the projects your firm commits to pursue results in a win? Many A/E/C firms still believe that the more proposals you pump out, the better chances you have of getting work. On the contrary—spending time and money to submit proposals without meaningful positioning effort is throwing money down the drain. Without a connection to the recipients and a shared understanding of the project drivers, your proposal is just another one in the pile.

The three things that impact hit rate the most (in typical order of engagement) include:

- Personal and effective due diligence before the RFP
- An honest go/no-go process
- Client and user-focused proposals and presentations

1140 Formosa Avenue, West Hollywood, CA. Lorcan O' Herlihy Architects.

SMPS CPSM

When business development has done its job, the most important messages in your proposals and presentations are not only anticipated by your selection committees, but they are also much easier to understand and applaud. When your clients already believe that you are completely in tune with the purpose and success factors of their project before the RFP, you are lined up for a smoother transition from opportunity to victory.

Now, for us business development leaders to generate a high hit rate (over 50 percent should always be the baseline of your goal), we need to develop honest and open rapport with our top client contacts. Here are 10 things we do (or can do) to make sure our client relationships are as strong as they can be:

Top 10 Things To Ensure Strong Relationships

1. Never come across as 'salesy,' i.e., only calling them for new work
2. Always be polite and personable with their staff or colleagues
3. Constantly look for opportunities to share insight, information, or lessons learned
4. Show interest in their personal interests
5. Regularly inquire about their perception of your firm's level of service and professionalism
6. Introduce them to your colleagues
7. Focus conversations around their needs, issues, and perspectives
8. Let them know that they are a priority—no matter how busy your firm is
9. Never allow them to feel that you are entitled to the next project
10. Be 100 percent honest with everything you say—and do what you say you're going to do

It would be difficult for any good business developer to argue with this list. With 25 years of experience leading business development and client relationship efforts, I have a keen knowledge of what clients like and what they don't like. What they like the most is when you listen, understand, and respond in a way that makes them feel very important to you. Since our clients pay our salaries, I think it's a good idea to cultivate that sense of commitment and level of trust … don't you?

Top 10 Signs of Client Trust

How do you know if your client relationships are truly strong and impactful for your firm's business? Well, here are 10 signs that tell you that your clients trust and like you:

1. They always return your communications in a timely manner
2. They always accept your invitations to gather (schedule permitting)
3. They contact you with a question or concern about anything (even project-related)
4. They never question your authenticity
5. They are comfortable calling you at night or on the weekend
6. They share their future project ideas with you before you even ask
7. They ask about your personal interests
8. They genuinely enjoy your company (you can tell…)
9. They ask you to play golf, go fishing, grab some lunch, or meet for a drink
10. They ask if you and your spouse could join them and their spouse for dinner

The last one on this list happened to me recently. It struck me powerfully as proof that the way I do my job and conduct myself as a professional is going in the right direction. As far as the entire list, we should consider these as our personal goals with our most treasured client contacts. Trust can be established from the very first time you ever meet a new prospective client (see the first list), and it never stops being something you must earn every day. We all have too much competition in our marketplaces to become complacent with our client contacts. Focus on them and their success consistently and they will be the driving force for your success in return. That is the truest testament of leadership—always enabling the success of others.

The role of business developer is not always understood in our industries. How many times have you heard someone say, "You just have lunch meetings and golf all the time!" That's okay, because when our firm has a strong backlog, our future project opportunity pipeline is full, and our hit rate is through the roof, they will likely understand. Let's never fall prey to something the venerable Roger Sterling once said during an episode of the great *Mad Men* series, "Why am I being punished for making my job look easy?"

We know it's not. We know it matters … and our best clients would agree. ■