

Building Profitable Client Relationships

If the lifeblood of a firm depends on building profitable relationships with clients, then why aren't more firms actively and constantly engaged in it? That's the question posed to Ron Worth, Assoc.AIA, CPSM. Ron has been an industry professional for more than a quarter century, and is currently CEO of the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS).

Ron claims that building relationships isn't popular due to lack of experience and confidence in doing it. There isn't formal training in how to bring in clients. Building relationships sounds like a complex task, yet the only major hurdle is that it involves a process of balancing the current ongoing work with the need to create future work.

What makes today's relationship building so different from that of the past, and why is it more important than ever before?

Ron commented; "we're faced with a very different marketplace than we've ever had before. Leads come from very untraditional sources, and relationships must be built not only with the direct client, but with all parties in their company. It's very fluid and transient today, in terms of the person you're dealing with on Monday can be totally different by Friday."

"Another factor is that the speed of construction is staggering. Previously we were dealing with 'fast-track' construction, and now it's 'flash-track' construction; i.e., how fast can you get this thing built. There is an outfit that can produce a 3D modeling of the project and a rough budget price, that the owner can walk around, and through. The client has a print on the desk in 15 minutes. That's what you're up against."

"It isn't that we've changed, it's that our clients have to get their products and services to market much faster than they've ever had to do before. Add in globalization, and top that with a change in client expectations to perform better than ever before. If they are not getting results from your firm every six months, you're out the door."

You have to be proactive, and Ron offered a few ways to make building client relationships more effective, and more productive.

"You never know where the next opportunity is going to come from. Keeping everyone engaged in finding out what clients are looking for is the key." Ron adds. "This is a relationship culture. Does your firm have it? If everyone hasn't bought into the plan you may as well throw it away. It's information gathering, and perception building. There has to be united messages about the firm."

Ron maintains; "relationship building is simple, but you must develop trust with those clients, as it really helps to bring their anxiety level down. Prospecting and networking is the name of the game, to keep those new clients coming in. You also have to balance two things; develop the clients you currently have, and develop a client replacement base, for the clients that are leaving you."

Ron has other suggestions for strengthening and maintaining client relationships.

"You should regularly visit with clients, just to stay in touch. Submit to awards programs for them, and then frame it after you've won, and give it to them. Conduct lunchbox seminars and workshops for your clients, on topics relating to their industry. It could make a big difference in cementing those relationships with the clients that you already have."

Some clients highlight a firm's promotional material in their office, because it highlights them and their project. There are other firms who have developed books for their clients on projects that they have done together. Find out the publications that your client is active in, and try to get articles published on their project. This helps your client be more successful in their business.

"You must display relentless optimism," says Ron, "clients want you to be positive, to say we're in this together. Clients also like persistence, having that energy level, having a creative team. They want team players – they want you to be a part of their team. You are a problem solver, not an architect, contractor, or engineer."

Ron adds, “you also have to look honest and trustworthy. Clients don’t want to deal with anybody that is not transparent. Your ethics have never been more important in the marketplace than they are right now.”

Final thoughts; “always be responsive. We all say we are, but are we really? Clients want you 24/7, that’s the name of the game today. Give them your home and cell phone number. They want you to be looking out for what’s best for them.”

Ron mentioned many ways to advance your firm’s relationship with clients, and keeping those client relations cemented, by using a creative approach to your promotional and proposal materials.

Themed proposals

A contracting firm began using proposals built around the theme for the project. They enclosed their proposal in a box. One had a barbeque theme, complete with steaks included along with other things that related to the project. This non-traditional approach to proposals helped them go from doing 50 million a year to three billion a year, and they get prequalified for every job, because their proposals are in demand.

Another firm developed beautifully hand-carved 11”x14” wooden boxes that are made in China, and their proposal fits into the box. Everybody wants these boxes. They are on every bid list, and are able to bypass the process, and be pre-approved ahead of time.

Help your client look better

An advertisement includes workers on the job talking about the quality of the client, and their safer environment. The client loved being known as someone concerned about the environment, and it helped perpetuate that perception in the marketplace.

Mandated Public Relations

Some firms are starting to mandate that everyone in the firm is rated on belonging to some group, or anything that gets positive press for the firm.

Branding

Owners feel good about being a part of the branding of a piece. A firm has put their clients pictures on baseball cards. The clients want them so they can give them out.

Newsletters

Some firms are making templates, and producing segmented newsletters to different clients types. It makes clients feel that the newsletter is developed just for them and their staff, so the word gets spread internally, and indirectly educates the entire client staff on your expertise.

Brochures

Instead of doing 30,000 dollar brochures, a lot of firms are directing them towards one project, or just doing them for their clients, and send an updated one every year. Clients love getting things that highlight their project.

Use your web site proactively

A lot of firms are producing different web sites for different client groups. This is another way to constantly enhance your relationship with your clients.

Virtual Reality

A lot of owners are embracing this new technology, using virtual walkthrough, which builds a file which can then be used for other purposes. The new concept of 3D, 4D, and 5D modeling is now a growing part of BIM (Building Information Modeling). Owners love that. Owners are embracing this lean design and construction, and feel this is the wave of the future.