



Client Apathy and How to Cure It

There aren't many funny stories in the newspaper these days, but I found one recently. It was an article detailing the closing of a furniture store in Albuquerque. When asked why they were shutting their doors, the owners cited "customer apathy". I couldn't help but laugh out loud when I read that. I'd never heard of customer apathy before. I'd certainly never seen it used as an excuse for mediocre service, or for products and pricing that consistently missed the market.

I stopped laughing when it occurred to me that sometimes professionals behave the same way. When our supply of work runs dry, we talk ourselves into believing it's not our fault. Maybe we blame market conditions ("the work's just not out there"), organizational problems ("I'm too busy and, besides, this firm doesn't support marketing"), or clients who fail to bring us more work ("these darn clients are so apathetic").

Whoever we blame, the responsibility ultimately lies with us, and we all know it. So, as we begin this brand new year, here are nine ways to cure client apathy.

1. Understand intellectually and emotionally that business development is about only three things: finding, creating and sustaining relationships. If you accept this premise, it will guide you effectively toward the most productive business development activities, whether they're with prospects, referral sources, or clients.

2. Know that clients become apathetic (and go to your competitors) when you are apathetic. If you are indifferent, clients will be, too. There are many ways to demonstrate indifference, but here are the top four that plague professionals: not returning phone calls promptly (WHY do we still have to talk about this?); writing or speaking too technically for your clients (making people feel stupid *is* stupid); treating clients as just

another case or problem (an attitude that comes across in your tone of voice, in your eye contact and level of engagement in the conversation); and, talking more than you listen.

3. Make your best first impression *each time you see or talk to clients*. Relationships begin with the first impression, and most of us work hard on that initial encounter. The key is to put the same effort into every exchange with a client.

4. Inject passion into your interactions. You can convey excitement and optimism while maintaining your professionalism and intellect. People are drawn to upbeat energy. If you exude it, they will respond positively. If you are consistently removed emotionally, which so many professionals feel the need to be, you cannot possibly connect with your client on any meaningful or lasting level.

5. Be completely focused on your client at every encounter. Turn off your cell phone, don't even think about sneaking a glance at your Blackberry, and even if you aren't thrilled to be where you are, act as though you are.

6. Do what you say you will do. When you promise something to a client, fulfill that promise or let them know immediately when and why you cannot. It is stunning how often professionals do not do this. Clients will often be understanding if you can't meet a deadline, but only if they hear from you beforehand. If you tell a client you'll call her for lunch or send her some information she wants, do it. Don't let it slide. People remember those who follow through and those who don't.

7. Genuinely look for ways to help your client. Stop worrying about whether you are selling, cross selling, or not selling. Start thinking about your client and how you can help. Often, this results in more work

I serve clients by:
Creating or enhancing marketing culture and infrastructure.
Aligning recruitment, hiring, training, and marketing programs.
Helping professionals set and achieve individual business development goals through marketing plans, coaching and communication skill development.

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for you. The client appreciates it and remembers you for it.

8. Leave your clients with a sense of hope. As professionals, we're not always dealing with sunny outlooks or outcomes, but it is in our best interests to convey hopefulness to our clients that things will improve, that you can help, that life will be

alright. Admittedly, this may fall into the category of practicing psychology without a license, but you don't need to make it complicated or overly emotional; it can be as simple as looking someone in the eye and saying a kind word or two.

9. Sustain a positive attitude. When clients ask you how business is, your

answer needs to be "Business is great, thanks, and we're looking for more." No client cares how busy you are, how overwhelmed you are, or how difficult your profession is. But they do care – intensely – about how you make them feel. If you are positive in your approach to them, they are far more likely to feel positive about you.

What DeBeers Knows That We Don't

One of my clients pointed me to an old Atlantic Monthly article about DeBeers Diamonds and how they came to monopolize the world market on those fabulous gems. If you want to read the full article, you will find it at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/198202/diamond>. In the meantime, I have a few thoughts on why DeBeers is stronger at creating and keeping a market than any professional services firm I know:

1. Through careful study and lots of planning, DeBeers knows precisely who their target market is. If every law and CPA firm knew this, and directed all its efforts as pointedly as DeBeers, we would all corner our markets, too.
2. They invest in repeat advertising, hammering the same message(s) home every time without deviation: Diamonds are forever. If professional services firms could find their central message and use it repeatedly to their target markets, they would begin to hear people repeating it back to them, just like DeBeers does. It's essential to determine your firm's message (one that's beyond a tag line and is authentic).

Managing Partners: Follow Up On Client Surveys

Many firms now conduct client surveys regularly. This is a great leap forward from just a few years ago. Handled correctly, the surveys can be a valuable research and marketing tool. Handled poorly, however, they can be detrimental.

When you conduct a survey, you ask your client to take time from his day to help you get better at what you do. Most clients, I've found, are willing to help when asked. And most often, the surveys return generally favorable results. That feels great and lets you know what you do well. The danger of client surveys lies in not dealing with those that aren't so good. Maybe the professional in charge of that client is lousy at doing things on time or at returning phone calls (a common complaint, as discussed in the cover article); maybe the bill is in a format that irritates this particular client; maybe the client feels left out of the process and feels anxious about information gaps.

The important thing to remember is that if the client feels strongly enough to complain, you simply must respond. If the problem is with the professional in charge, you need to

Then, keep using it in all forms of communication – including information that comes from the mouths of the firm's owners.

3. DeBeers sells the public an idea rooted in emotions. They aren't just selling carbon-pressurized crystals. They are selling love, success, status. Buying decisions are most often made using more emotion than logic. It's no different when choosing a lawyer or CPA. Do I like him? Do I trust him? Do I want to give him my business? These are the things people consider most often when purchasing professional services. They are emotional, not logical.

4. DeBeers works strategically with competitors to great profit (some would say DeBeers bullies its partners into submission, but that is not my point). Look carefully to find out if there are opportunities for your firm to cooperate with others who might ordinarily be competitors.

CPA firms and law firms could learn much from how product companies build their businesses. DeBeers is one of many examples.

talk directly with that partner, find out what is happening on his side of the desk (without accusing him of anything) and then work together to resolve the client's problem. This often is not easy, but it's a lot easier and cheaper than replacing a dissatisfied client. You also need to contact the client and let him know you are aware of his complain and what you have done in response.

Without doubt, the worst thing you can do is ask a client what he thinks and then do nothing when he says something is bothering him. If you don't want to know, don't ask.

On the flip side of this issue, good client comments can become a marketing tool and morale builder. You can broadcast these good comments throughout the firm as a way of patting the professional on the back and letting other professionals know what good service is, as seen through the eyes of a client. Further, the professional receiving good comments on a survey now has a reason to call that client and thank him for his kind words. And that's another opportunity to sustain a good relationship.