

# Clients - love 'em or curse 'em ... but how well do you really know them?

Barely a day passes these days without an article or TV programme focusing on the 'customer'. Customers hold the purse strings. Whether in business or the home, customers – in other words, any buyer of goods or services – expect service, speed, good value and reliability. Never more so than now in these challenging economic times when every pound counts and competition is high.

Few customers voice their opinions unless asked – but behind the scenes there may be moves afoot to review existing business relationships, put work out to tender or consider competitors whose targeting efforts have been noticed.

Many businesses have customer/client liaison systems in place, relationship managers, client teams and even customer reviews. Any business which feels it has 100% of the customer's loyalty should feel free to stop reading now ... your time may be better spent on other priorities. However, readers who consider that any client relationship may be less than 100% secure may find this article of interest.

Much has been changing in recent years ... the client or customer with whom the day-to-day relationship exists may hold the purse strings and decision-making authority, but there are often new forces at play. The rise of procurement departments and "hubs", the increasing use of tendering to drive down costs and enhance service levels, and the greater analysis of each business in the way it operates have all come into play in a way not experienced before.

All businesses would be wise to take stock of their client portfolios, *especially* in tough economic times.

The opportunity to understand clients and stay close to them has never been greater. Consider for a moment:

- Which clients account for the lion's share of your business's income – this year, next year and beyond? How profitable are they? How are they faring in this economic climate?
- Do you have 100% of their spend or do you share it with competitors?
- Have you won important new clients, through tendering, targeting efforts or lateral hire/mergers? How well do you know them? How well do they know you?
- Who looks after your key relationships? Do clients or customers give you feedback on how they perceive those relationships?
- What do your clients or customers think you do well ... and could do better?
- If you do gather feedback, how is this done and what happens to it? Who knows about it?
- If you do know your customers inside out – from their perspective, what have you changed as a result of the feedback you have received? How have they benefited?

Surprisingly few businesses can answer these questions fully. Those who do stand out in the competitive marketplace and will prosper in good times and bad.

Over the past 20 years, I have specialised in client relationship management working as an executive in leading professional services firms, and I have now created a specialist consultancy to help businesses win, manage and expand client relationships.

Interviewing several hundred businesses during my career has given me the opportunity to "stand in the client's shoes" and bring those views in-house with an independence that day-to-day relationships cannot achieve.

Businesses I have visited have ranged from SMEs to some of the world's largest and most complex corporate structures. They have touched on every conceivable market sector and type of business, public sector and private sector, and they have been based in the UK and abroad. No client has ever refused a visit and, once in a client's premises, the time and enthusiasm for the visit has exceeded expectations!

While questionnaires and surveys have a time and a place, the investment in face-to-face satisfaction visits will reap much greater rewards for both the client and the supply organisation.

My experience has shown that a few relationships are in real jeopardy; those which have genuinely been teetering on the brink have been saved and strengthened, simply by the timing of the visit, the ear of someone who can listen objectively, and the commitment made at the visit to address the client's issues. However, while the majority of relationships are strong there is always room for improvement ... and at times like this, that improvement can bring greater security to the relationship, possibly avert a tender, and potentially keep a competitor at bay.

As well as taking stock of the client's current satisfaction, of equal importance is the opportunity to understand the client's business priorities and future plans. This is an integral part of an independent client visit and reinforces the message being given that the firm is taking the time and interest to find out what is important and how the client can be supported best in the future. A visit itself can enhance goodwill and reputation, and gather new knowledge. Any customer or client receives an unequivocal message simply by the visit itself: "we care."

Equipped with the wealth of information gathered in a face-to-face meeting, your own business can implement or adapt strategic goals with the clients' perspectives very much in mind. No guesswork ... and the client sees that your decisions are aligned to their current and future needs.

And, lest you think that a visit is all about strategic and blue sky thinking, little things will come out ... and they matter. They may be "small" but to the client, they will be important points of detail which, once implemented, will be proof of "listening".

Businesses which survive and prosper during the economic downturn will be those which really understand their clients or customers, and can work with them as business partners, strengthening the relationships all the time. The depth of knowledge about clients – individually and collectively – and the appetite to embrace the feedback and embed it in every day life will give a business the opportunity to add more value and anticipate changing needs...becoming or reinforcing the position of trusted business partner.

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*Carolyn Roberson is a business consultant specialising in client relationship management with a particular emphasis on client satisfaction programmes and training executives in CRM skills. Carolyn has received a number of significant awards for her pioneering work in professional services, including The Daily Telegraph/energis Customer Service Award. To discuss any client relationships, tendering or strategic marketing on a confidential basis, please contact Carolyn Roberson Consulting by phone or email, details below.*

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