

# Service Provider Or Business Partner: Which Are You?

By Karen L. Compton

I used to believe that Presidents, CEOs, and CFOs were interested in hiring the best service provider--a firm or individual experienced at the delivery of a specialized service--be it architecture, engineering, legal, finance, or audit.

Then I had the opportunity to discuss this perception with a few close colleagues who wore that hat. Since I'm in the built environment, my "million dollar" question was, "What do you look for in selecting an architect?" The answer applied to any service provider. After thinking about my question for only a minute, virtually all of the professionals I queried responded, "I no longer select 'just architects.' I select business partners."

A paradigm shift occurs in assuming the role of business partner versus that of service provider. Which one are you?

## **Business Partners Think Of Themselves Relative To The Client And Not The Competition.**

As a service provider, a firm is constantly defining its services based on what makes them unique in the marketplace. Those factors can include, but are not limited to, fee, service, or delivery. How are my services priced? How do we service the client? What is the quality of the deliverable? The answers are measured relative to the competition's performance—are they cheaper, more service-oriented, or providing a better deliverable?

Business partners don't define themselves relative to the competition. Rather, they define themselves relative to the client's needs and expectations. The same simple questions about fee, service, and delivery are less focused on competitiveness in the marketplace and more driven by a true understanding of how the client does business. Which brings me to my next point...

## **Business Partners Understand Every Aspect Of Their Client's Business.**

Service providers understand all of the aspects of their own business or industry. However, business partners attempt to understand every aspect of their client's business and how the two integrate. Why? Oftentimes, decisions about professional service firms are driven by issues and concerns that have nothing to do with the sought out service. What's more, that decision is sometimes made by people who may or may not have intimate knowledge of your service and its value.

In a global economy in which services, architecture, engineering, or almost any other service could be procured from half a continent away (and often is), it is central to your business to be cognizant and well-versed on legislative, policy, and code changes, operation and maintenance concerns, human resources, and finance/audit. More importantly, it is crucial to integrate that knowledge with your service.

As one of my colleagues put it, "I'm not looking for you to be an expert. I am not looking for a salesperson. I am looking for you to understand my business and service my clients."

### **Business Partners Don't Sell. They Offer Solutions.**

Years ago, I stopped "selling" professional services and started listening to my clients' needs, issues, and concerns. Although my ultimate goal was to position myself to work with them in the future, I quickly learned that "selling" wouldn't get me there.

As a sounding board for the issues many of my clients faced—staffing, auditing, operations/maintenance—I became a reliable resource for advice, counsel, and even referrals. While this approach to positioning might have taken longer to develop, with it has come a long and steady stream of devotees who know that I have their best interests at heart. And, oh yes, it has resulted in a number of ongoing contracts and referrals for services.

How do you change your game and become a business partner versus a service provider? Begin by understanding that it's not going to happen overnight. Assuming the role of a business partner requires a shift in your approach. Rethink it.

Define your service based on the client's needs as they see them, not as you perceive them. Let your client's demands, not the competition, drive your fee and service delivery.

Develop an understanding of every aspect of your client's business. While conferences are often the "mode of choice" for networking and developing a knowledge base, they can often be expensive and time consuming. Consider cost effective alternatives. Subscribe to industry journals and publications that your client reads. Review proposed or pending legislation that could impact your clients. (State sponsored websites are best at garnering this type of information.)

Rethink the old idea of a "leads group." Expand the membership to those outside of your immediate industry. If you're in construction, for example, include lawyers, title companies, banks, and/or valuation consultants. If you're in healthcare, include architects, engineers, contractors, audit firms, or specialties such as travel companies or public relations.

You might just find that you share a few things in common—interest in the same or similar clients as well as a partial understanding of the client's business. Equally important is your ability to begin to develop a vast network of resources that can service any aspect of your client's business. And that is the best positioning of all.

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