

Balancing credibility and integrity

The meeting is going well, you've been getting lots of buying signals, and then it arrives – the question you really don't want to answer.

“And have you done this before?” or worse:

“How many times have you done this before?”

Of course, you haven't done this before, not once, never mind several times! But you've done something similar, and you have been involved on the fringes of a few projects that came close.

You are now in the classic dilemma –making the choice between your integrity and your credibility. It is vital that the client trusts you, so if you say you've done something and then they discover otherwise, that trust will be broken, and will be very hard to recover.

On the other hand, if you are completely honest, they are likely to lose confidence in you, and then you either lose the business, or have to work ten times harder to convince them that you can do it.

Neither is a good option, but if you have to choose, sacrifice credibility. It is recoverable, whereas your integrity is far more valuable, and far less easily re-established with a client, if at all. If in doubt, assume that once trust is lost, it is lost forever, and how many people do you know who want to buy services from someone they cannot trust?

The following case study demonstrates how to achieve the balancing act.

Case study

Tom is a new consultant with ABC Solutions, holding his first project set-up meeting with a newly won client. The meeting has started well. He has the right people there, and they all seem keen.

He has just finished outlining the agenda for the meeting, when Caroline asks, “Tom, before we start, I'd like to be clear on something that's bothering me. I understand you've never done this type of project before, is that right?”

Tom has been with ABC for six months, and this is certainly his first time. He decides to be honest.

“You are quite right, Caroline, this is my first time on a project of this type, although I have done quite similar work.”

“I didn't actually mean you, Tom, although thank you for telling us, I meant your company.”

She is right, and he decides to prevaricate.

“Can I just ask where you are going with your questions, Caroline? I’m happy to answer them, but I’m not sure what purpose....”

“I just want to know who I’m dealing with. If it’s a load of novices, then the information I give and the amount of checking I do will be greater than if I know you are seriously experienced in this field. I may want to bring in further expert advisors too.”

The rest of the group nods assent, and Tom is back in the hot seat.

“Well, I think it comes down to degrees of similarity. I can’t give you a definitive answer here, but what I do know is that our company is very experienced in managing projects that are similar, and have been consistently successful. I think it is the way we work, our attention to detail and our project management skills that will deliver for you. And that is more important than whether we have done exactly the same thing for another client.”

Tom sees a positive response from the group to his words, but Caroline still looks doubtful.

“If you want a more precise answer, Caroline, I can find out more detail after the meeting. Shall we talk then?”

Caroline shrugs, and this is Tom’s cue to move on swiftly, and hope that she does not follow this up afterwards. If she does, he will refer the problem upwards, and make sure that his boss has time to prepare his answer.

He has succeeded in doing two key things – he has maintained integrity, by not lying about his own, or his company’s experience, and he has maintained credibility, by placing emphasis on their working methods and track record, rather than their specific project experience.

The group were clearly happy with this response, and when he saw that Caroline was not, he offered her precise detail after the meeting, which made it difficult for her to continue the debate with him. She would have appeared to be nit picking, and her shrug acknowledged that.

When faced with this type of question, it is always a balancing act between honesty and credibility. If in doubt, honesty wins, because if the client discovers you have deceived them, the relationship will be severely damaged. Better to tell the truth, and lose credibility.

On the other hand, there is no need to rush to the client and tell them that this is your first time, when you have not been asked. It goes without saying that you would not take on a project that you were not competent to complete, so you are justified in maintaining as much credibility as you can.