

Helping your client to sell your services

Have you ever been in the situation where you have made a sale to an existing client, only to find that although they hold the budget, they are not the final decision-maker, and cannot convince the person who approves the expenditure to sign on the dotted line?

Or your best client – let's call him Malcolm, leaves to go to a new company which has very different ideas about employing consultants. He would hire you tomorrow, but he does not feel comfortable just walking in and bringing his tame consultant with him. "What did we hire you for", is a question he fears would be asked, "if you immediately need to bring in a helper? Don't you have the expertise you claimed at interview?"

In both these situations, you need to help your client to sell your services. They want to hire you, but they do not know how to convince others of your worth. Be straight with them, because you are going to work together on a sales campaign, so do not dress it up – this is selling!

Selling into a new organisation

You have a bigger job to do if it is a new company, because neither you nor your client will know where the power base is, whether any politics are in play, and what hot buttons to press. You will guide Malcolm to find this information, which he will need in any case if he is to operate effectively in his new role.

At the same time, you will brief Malcolm always to downplay any personal relationship you may have, so that it does not appear that he is "in your pocket." He can certainly talk about your excellent track record of achievement, but not the fact that you've worked with him continuously for the last five years. If he is not careful, it will seem that he wants to hire you for his personal benefit, or as a favour to you, not for the benefit of the organisation.

It is therefore the business benefits of your proposal that you will focus on, and the easier they are to measure, the easier the sale will be. If you can show an increase in revenue or a decrease in costs, you are practically home and dry. Sadly, few services translate quite so neatly into financial gain, but it is the only place to start from, so that even if you are claiming something intangible, like an improvement in morale, this can still be translated into reduced turnover, absenteeism, or improved productivity, and then into to a financial measure.

When Malcolm has researched the political structure, you can discuss whose hot buttons need pressing in order to make your sale. Pay careful attention to the politics of the situation. If it is the Sales and Marketing Director, Susie, who holds all the power, but your client reports to Mike, the Head of Marketing, it is vital not to alienate Mike by going straight to the decision-maker, Susie.

One technique might be for you to make direct contact with Susie without reference to your client, especially if you feel you have a strong message for her. This would apply where the hot buttons are not shared down the line, so Mike might say no to something that he does not see as an issue, whereas Susie might think differently. Be very careful how you make this direct approach – it must not look like conspiracy between you and your client.

The best outcome is where the business problem you are solving is a hot button for everyone concerned, but if this had been the case, your client would probably not have needed your help to sell it.

Another approach would be for Malcolm, to point out to his boss, Mike, that although the proposition is no big deal for him, it means a lot to Susie, and this is a chance for him to gain brownie points, and then maybe use those brownie points to win agreement from Susie for something that Mike has been wanting to do for ages. Essentially Malcolm is helping his boss negotiate with his boss, which is fine, if it is all in a good organisational cause, because it goes without saying that what you are selling meets a real organisational need.

Sometimes the business need may be felt more strongly outside your client's department. In which case, you would send Malcolm off to lobby interested groups, preferably at senior level, so that Susie's equivalent in Services or Operations might put some pressure on her to fix the problem or initiate a new programme – the end result of which will be hiring you!

Personal Coach

If you have been Malcolm's personal coach in his previous company, then a different approach is needed, and patience may all that is required. A company is unlikely to want to invest in training someone they have just hired, so it may take a while before your newly arrived client can broach the subject of personal development to their boss.

Specialist Expertise

On the other hand, if you have a specialist skill which Malcolm could not be expected to have brought with him, then he can quickly justify using your services in this specific area – assuming, of course, that there is a business need. This is really the golden rule in this whole process, that what you are selling will provide a real business benefit, and then your patience and perseverance will eventually pay off, for you, your client and the organisation.

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