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News

August 24, 2008 8:40 PM

It's Worth Going the Extra Mile

Adding Value for Clients Makes the Difference Between Service, Transaction

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

I once was caught in a bind after discovering I had to attend a last-minute client meeting on a day I had worn jeans and a polo shirt into the office. A quick run to a local retailer solved my problem with the purchase of a pair of Dockers and a nice Oxford shirt.

Upon hearing of my predicament, the retailer went an extra step and offered to remove the tags and press the items for me. After a quick change, I left freshly dressed, with my jeans packed up for travel. By delivering just a little more service, the retailer did a wonderful job of engendering trust and appreciation.

In service relationships, that kind of extra care keeps customers happy and increases the chances they will remain clients for a long time.

For media planners, there are plenty of opportunities to grow client relationships into long and happy ones by delivering small, extra bits of service.

It can be hard under today's operational media paradigms for planners to deliver that little bit extra. Stretched staffs and rigid adherence to scope of work or negotiated hours can foster an environment where planners are less likely to go above and beyond, even for little things. But planners need to remember that part of the reason clients retain professionals is to access their expertise. When there is an opportunity to foster client appreciation, why should that expertise be limited to the scope of work?

The important thing here is to note that if media planners adhere strictly to assignments within the scope, the relationship will begin to feel more like a transaction to clients than a service. And creating a feeling of transaction with clients is a bad thing. If a relationship functions merely as a transaction, there's little to stop a client from turning to another provider who can deliver the same transaction for a lower price.

As in the retail example, the key to delivering a positive service experience is to make the customer feel appreciated. In his 2005 book "Never Eat Alone," consultant Keith Ferrazzi discusses many methods of cultivating relationships across the breadth of one's acquaintances. Mr. Ferrazzi goes far beyond the efficacy of simple networking and really dives into what is required to make substantive connections with others.

Most of the best practices Mr. Ferrazzi discusses hinge on understanding the needs of others and trying to deliver something of value to them to help address those needs. Something of value might be a bit of useful

information or the connection to someone that can help in solving a problem. Mr. Ferrazzi suggests doing this not for those who have hired you, those you expect something from or those closest to you, but for all those with whom you might wish to cultivate a relationship, even those you might be meeting for the first time.

Mr. Ferrazzi's best practices echo Stephen Covey's principles of effectively communicating with others; namely, demonstrating empathy and understanding before trying to communicate your point of view. When someone receives something of value, or feels that another understands his situation, he feels appreciated; that appreciation opens the door for a deeper, more trusting relationship. Media planners who employ this best practice may be significantly increasing their chances at not only strengthening client relationships, but in selling media plan recommendations.

There are many things media planners can do that don't require a lot of effort, yet can provide clients with something of value that will be appreciated. Many ideas connect to activities planners already engage in and wouldn't take a whole lot of extra effort to enhance.

Listen. When you are interacting with clients, take the time to listen to their concerns. What is keeping them awake at night, whether it's media-based or not? Try to understand where they could use a little added value. As you navigate your way through your work week, keep an eye out for things that might be of use to your client.

Attend conferences. Planners may already be attending media conferences or gatherings that focus on categories specific to a client's brand. While participating in these events, planners should take care to look out for information that might be relevant or useful for a client. They also should make an effort to connect with other participants who could add value for their client.

When the event is over, there likely will be value to the client in issuing a report on what was learned at the conference and how it relates to a client's business. Follow up with those potentially advantageous contacts. Connect them to your client.

Read the trades and newsletters. Most media people engage in this activity every day. How often do you read a news item that has relevance for your client? Do you ignore it? Save it for your own files? If you are considering the trade press only from the perspective of your personal interest, subtly alter your view. What you are learning might have value to your client also. If you are not already passing interesting news along to your client, make a habit of doing so.

What about reading stories about new-media types or new vehicle opportunities? Perhaps write up a brief assessment with pros and cons in an e-mail to your client. Demonstrate a proactive orientation while providing value.

Share category information. Media planners should always have an eye on resources that can provide competitive insight. Whether it is an industry report issued by Advertising Age that might contain competitive spending information or a case study in the Harvard Business Review, third-party information about your client's category will always be valuable. Get on a subscription list if you're not already reading key industry or category publications. If you are, don't forget to pass along what you may find.

Offer best practices or white papers. There's a good chance clients were impressed by the capabilities of your broader media organization before they hired you. Don't forget to give them ongoing access to the breadth of

the organization. Many times, media organizations will create a team for a client, but all the client ever experiences is the view from within its team's silo.

Make sure you give clients some additional value from the organization as a whole. That value could be in the form of best practices presentations across the network or white papers on some topical subject written by one of the organization's industry experts. If you can provide that information to your client with some spin as to how it relates to or could positively affect their business, so much the better.

Open training sessions. Does your media unit schedule frequent training sessions on general or topical subjects? Extend to your clients the invitation to personally join or to open the session up for junior staff within their organization. Provide value by helping them or their staff be better informed.

Training possibilities don't just stop at your doors. If you happen to hear about a training session the client is conducting for his organization, make an effort to understand what topics will be covered. You may get lucky and discover that you or someone in your organization can bring some expertise to the table on a particular subject. Create a presentation for the client or arrange for someone to help with the training.

Facilitate interaction. If you are a planning professional at a higher level, look for opportunities to add value by giving your clients two of the most valuable assets you have to offer: your time and your network. Conduct a thoughtful audit of your network. Do you have any friends or acquaintances in other industries who might help answer some of your client's current needs? Maybe you have contacts in the sales rep community who are on the cutting edge of something new and potentially interesting to the client.

Carve out some time to take the client out to dinner with those individuals. Or take them golfing or to a live event of some sort. Don't angle to dominate your client's time. Organize the group in a way that facilitates your client's interaction with the others who can add fresh perspective.

Keep your relationship with your client fresh, vital and valued. It doesn't take a lot of effort for any planner to extend himself or herself just a little beyond the typical scope of expected work and provide things for a client that will be valued and appreciated. In doing so, you can make yourself an asset that a client will trust and value over time.

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