

ENSURING SATISFIED CLIENTS

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In today's markets, it is unlikely (though not impossible) that you will be competitive on price alone. In fact, the most profitable type of service to provide is a newly-designed one that is specific to your customers' needs — i.e., a service that addresses an unmet need. If your quality control and cultural sensitivity are good, customers will usually pay a premium for such a service.

In order to be competitive, your service design needs to meet or exceed current client expectations. Be alert to the fact that clients' expectations may change due to new competitor strategies before your service is completed. For example, if your law firm provides legal opinions within two working days, for example, but your competitor suddenly teams up with a law firm in another time zone so that they can “work around the clock” and deliver within eight hours, you may find that clients start to view your service as “slow.”

To be competitive, your service must provide clients with a sense of “value for money.” When clients contract for a service, they are looking not only for the content of the service but also at the process by which the service is delivered. Remember that your clients increasingly can find a way to self-serve. So they must feel that they get added value by contracting with you. Timeliness and quality control are part of those process features. Make it worth your client's while to have contracted with you instead of self-serving.

Cost efficiency and quality level need to be considered together, along with price setting and degree of customization. Cost efficiency implies “at the lowest possible cost.” If the aim is to provide the minimum acceptable quality at the lowest price, then costs need to be kept to a minimum. This is a “no frills” approach. Clients who want to keep their transaction costs down will appreciate such a standardized approach and the lack of extras. If, however, clients are looking for highly customized service where they need exert little effort, they are usually prepared to trade off a higher price for extra attention and a sense of “no cost spared.”

How efficiently your staff can provide services depends in part on the environment in which they work. You will, of course, want to make sure that standard office equipment is available and in good operating order. It is not enough to purchase photocopiers and fax machines, for example, if they are not maintained in good working order. Regular preventive maintenance on office equipment is critical to avoid delays in service delivery. Probably the most important and overall most expensive equipment for your business is your information technology (IT) — computers, printers, scanners, local area networks, etc. Unfortunately, the technology is changing very rapidly and so IT equipment is often obsolete soon after it is purchased. If you are to provide quality support to your staff, you will need to make provisions to keep no more than “one generation” behind the current industry standard — which probably means upgrading computers and peripherals once a year.

Since it is not possible to “inventory” staff time, one of your constant challenges is being able to

match client demands with the staff time that you have available. There are several strategies available to you, such as:

- Soliciting some client work that can be scheduled around other commitments.
- Developing retainer relationships with clients to make demands more predictable.

You will also want to use internal tools to ensure that time lines are realistic and are being met. Most professionals are trained to develop work plans for their clients, at least at the general level of due dates for specific deliverables. You can complement those client work plans with some form of office schedule that combines all client commitments into a single time line. That way you can easily spot times when your staff are over- or under-committed. A work plan tool can be elaborate, such as MS Project, or simple, such as a master wall calendar or an electronic spreadsheet.

Once clients select a service provider, they continue to evaluate whether or not they have made the right choice. There are several aspects of service delivery that will influence that assessment process and hence their overall satisfaction. One of these is attribution of responsibility. No matter how hard you work at providing an excellent service, external factors will intervene. Power outages will disrupt your electronic transmissions of client reports, airline inefficiencies may delay your arrival, and so on. If clients believe that you could have avoided the problem, they will hold you responsible and be dissatisfied with the quality of service they received. If, however, they correctly attribute the problem to external forces, plus they see that you have done everything possible to compensate, their satisfaction level will not be affected. Similarly, when you work hard to make sure that a service is delivered on time and to service standards, make sure that your clients know and give you credit for your efforts.

Overall what you want is for clients to remain in a state of *mindlessness*, meaning that they assume you will provide a good service. When there are minor problems, they will tend to overlook them. Once, however, a client is triggered into *mindfulness* by some kind of service problem, that client often becomes overly critical of every nuance of service provision. Unfortunately, no matter how hard you try, things will go wrong from time to time. When that happens, clients' satisfaction and reversion to mindlessness is strongly influenced by how you *recover* from the problem. If you take no apparent responsibility and make no effort to address the consequences for clients, clients' dissatisfaction will increase significantly. If, on the other hand, you take the initiative to resolve the difficulty in a manner that meets clients' needs, clients become more loyal because they can trust that you will look after their best interests!