
Grow Your Business With Relationship Marketing

by MARSHA LINDQUIST

Everyone wants powerful word-of-mouth advertising for their business. When your satisfied clients refer new business to you because you've done your job — and done it well — you increase your revenue and need to spend less time and money on marketing and advertising. Does it get any better? Well, yes it could!

In addition to sending you referral business for new clients, your current clients should be cultivated for their repeat business. Relationship marketing is the practice of using the positive feelings of your existing clients to generate more work for yourself, perhaps in new areas, as you expand your offerings.

When you market to your current clients, you can avoid dreaded cold-calling, minimize marketing and advertising costs, and get a guaranteed higher rate of return on the time and money you do spend marketing to those who already know and love your work. That's as opposed to the difficulty and expense of pursuing potential new clients who don't know how well you do what you do.

Consider these easy marketing steps that can help you in your quest to create passionate clients.

Get Client Feedback

To understand what you do well and what needs improvement, survey your clients at the end of an assignment or once a year. This allows invaluable real-time feedback on your work and also helps you to continue your relationship with the client beyond the project, which in turn improves your chances of getting more work from them. Ideally, take clients to lunch and talk one-on-one; you can learn more that way than you can with a phone conversation or office visit.

As you begin each project, let the client know that you will want feedback at the project's end, especially if you are at some distance from your clients and can't take them to lunch. E-mail the questions ahead of time even if you will be able to meet in per-

son, so they have some time to prepare and won't feel caught off-guard.

For the most useful feedback, ask questions that get them to think and communicate their feelings about you and the work you did. Try adapting these questions to your business:

- "In past assignments or a recent project we did for you, what do you think worked well? What did you love about our work?"
- "What did you gain from the experience of working with us? What have you been able to implement as a result of the work?"
- "What could we have improved on as we worked with you? Is there anything you feel we could have done more or less of? Did you hope for anything that you didn't get?" (The idea here is to ask questions that will uncover future client needs, not necessar-

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ily anything you didn't do well.) Don't forget: This exercise is meant to generate their comments, so let your client talk.

Give Away Information Freely and Frequently

Who doesn't like to get stuff that's free? By giving selected pieces of information away at no charge and on a regular basis — through e-zines, seminars, teleseminars, booklets and articles — you can give clients something they've never seen before, opening their minds to new possibilities for using your services.

Experiment with new ways you can give your clients information about you to remind them of what you know. Get them thinking about what they could be doing differently in their own organizations and about how you might help them with that.

Don't worry that they won't work with you because you've already given them everything they need free! You're only giving them a tantalizing taste of what you

know and can do — not the whole meal. Design the information so they know that behind what you're giving them lies a host of other important information with practical application in their organization. In other words, this information you offer for free only hints at your expertise and how best to apply that knowledge so that it works for them.

Create a Positive Stir

While it may not be entirely true that bad publicity is better than no publicity, there is nothing wrong with doing something a little edgy, even a little outrageous, to generate positive buzz and potential new clientele. Do whatever it takes to get your name out there in the public eye in a light-hearted, positive way.

You can do this by publishing cutting-edge articles in trade journals that help you make a name for yourself. Or try throwing an event that gets people's attention and puts your good reputation out there.

How does this "positive stir" help cultivate relationships with current clients? When your current clients see or hear of others using your products or services, they remember how great you are to work with. You're now back on their radar screen, and if they need what you offer, they'll come back to you, even if they've been approached by other companies that offer the same thing as you.

Build a Client Community

Look for opportunities to invite clients and key stakeholders to come together in a fun, relaxing social setting so all of your clients can have a chance to get to know one another. This creates a synergy among your clients; what you do for one client may be something you could do for another. Gather clients to celebrate a business anniversary. Host a free educational seminar or teleseminar to bring your client community together so that they learn from one another the other possibilities of working with you.

By introducing clients, you're helping them to network, and when they start talking, they'll inevitably talk about you, hopefully in glowing terms. Very often you'll find that soon after your clients talk to each other, your phone will ring when one or another of them calls you.

If your clients all over the globe and "get together" events aren't possible, you can still virtually get your clients talking to each other.

You can start an e-mail discussion group, an online bulletin board, or a fan web site. Additionally, put real customers in your advertising and marketing pieces. Another aspect of creating community is giving your customers a feel for the "real" people behind your company, so also put real people on your web site (not just the CEO), put faces on your business cards, and write customer case studies that show how you have a proven track record. Clients need to feel they are a part of your community of other customers, so make it easy for them to see all the other people or companies you help.

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Offer Samples of Other Capabilities

Your newer clients may know you and appreciate your expertise, but they're only familiar with one aspect of the work you're capable of. Offering live examples of what you can do, through a seminar, for example, can show current clients what you have to offer that is ancillary to your primary work.

Again, don't worry that you're giving away the farm when you offer a sampling of your knowledge to entice a client to do further business with you. A seminar is just a live version of your e-zines and articles; it should introduce your clients who've concentrated their work with you in one aspect of your business to other things that you do. And teleseminars

and booklets for your out-of-town clients should just leave them wanting more of your great work.

Communication Builds Confidence — and Clientele!

Like any good relationship, this sort of marketing works best when you and your clients have excellent communication. What are you doing to demonstrate to your clients that you produce the results you promise? If you try any or all of these steps, you'll know, because they'll tell you. These steps will lead you to more open communication with your current clients, and with greater communication comes more opportunities for work from clients with whom you already have an excellent relationship. You'll know ev-

erything you need to know about what your client wants and needs, and you become their indispensable solution! □

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