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**The Ultimate Advantage:  
Forging Stronger Partnerships  
with Your Clients**

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# The Ultimate Advantage

## FORGING STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS WITH YOUR CLIENTS

MICHAEL BRIZZ CMC

Have you ever wondered the following:

How do I respond to increasing competition for consulting services?

How should I sell when it is increasingly difficult to meet the decision makers, and decisions now involve more people who are experienced and cynical?

How do I compete against more entrenched consulting companies?

As consultants, we face an ever-challenging marketing situation. Not only is it increasingly difficult to secure new clients, but we have to fight harder to keep those we have. And it is likely to get more challenging in the future.

### ***How Should We Respond?***

Unfortunately, many consultants respond by slipping into a competitive selling posture and focusing their selling and marketing efforts on beating the competition. They engage in activities that include bad-mouthing a competitor, directing their sales effort to counter a competitor's sales tactics, or competing on price. Although this reaction is understandable, it frequently backfires on the consultant. These behaviors encourage price shopping and negotiation, and potentially degrade the consultant's position within the account. Most significantly, a competitive selling strategy distracts us from our most important job—serving client needs. When consultants focus their energies on beating a competitor, they give away a huge advantage:

leveraging their understanding of the client's unmet needs. It is as if they choose to fight over a piece of the pie instead of creating a bigger pie.

A more effective response to these challenges is to forge closer relationships with clients. Although this is not a new strategy, it is now more important than ever. If we as consultants fail to secure close client relationships, we significantly degrade our profitability. Many companies report that securing a new customer costs five times as much as keeping an old customer. I believe the differential will increase. The cost to secure a new client continues to increase because the buying process is lengthening and becoming more complex. In addition, selling to prospective clients typically requires more extensive proposals, more intensive negotiation with a greater likelihood of concessions, and much more time.

Conversely, if we forge strong partnerships with clients, then we secure a substantial competitive and financial advantage. Beyond the obvious savings in selling costs and time, we secure the huge advantage of being able to recognize, study, and articulate unmet client needs before anyone else.

### ***How to Forge Stronger Bonds with Clients***

Forging stronger bonds requires executing a comprehensive strategy that includes how we market, how we serve clients during an assignment, and how we work with clients to identify future win/win opportunities.

■ *By staying attuned to a client's needs—present and future—you can nurture a relationship that will endure well beyond the current contract.*

■ *En restant à l'écoute des besoins présents et futurs des clients, il est possible de développer des relations qui dureront bien au-delà du contrat actuel.*

■ *Indem Sie auf die Bedürfnisse eines Kunden eingestellt bleiben—sowohl jetzt als auch zukünftig—können Sie eine Verbindung fördern, die auch jenseits des laufenden Vertrags Bestand hat.*



## Marketing and Selling

It all begins with our marketing posture—how we see ourselves and the position we seek in the marketplace. Too often, the marketing effort is driven by consultants' need to sell rather than by a client's need to solve a problem. As a result, we take on the posture of an "expert selling services," with a reliance on tools such as direct mail, advertising, seminars, and telemarketing. There is nothing wrong with selling services. However, we are at a significant disadvantage if potential clients perceive us as an "expert selling services" rather than a partner committed to creating client successes. These two marketing postures are contrasted in Figure 1.

Although the differences may seem semantic on the surface, these postures drive different behaviors and result in very different client perceptions.

Examine your operation. Does your selling and marketing effort radiate a message of "expert selling services" or that of someone committed to the client's success?

Securing the position of valued partner requires a substantial investment by the consul-

tant. Let's examine the potential payoff. In addition to the cost savings mentioned earlier, the client partner can provide very useful selling assistance with testimonials, referrals, and introductions. The client can also become a vital player in the innovation efforts of your firm through collaborating on research projects and hosting beta sites. If you have created a trusting relationship, the client will disclose more information and allow you freer access to staff and operations. With this, you should be the first to identify pressing needs and high-profit collaboration opportunities with your client.

### Developing High-Profit Relationships

Being a consultative partner means more than just selling differently. It involves the total service package provided and the entire relationship.

In the pressure to complete an assignment by the agreed date, it is easy to become contract oriented and focus our energies around accomplishing the agreed-to tasks. However, clients are looking for more than just the letter of the contract to be fulfilled. They want victories; they want the project to produce results. But beyond

**Figure 1** CHARACTERISTICS OF A CONSULTATIVE PARTNER

	Expert Selling Services	Consultative Partner
<b>Marketing objectives</b>	Looks for short-term profit opportunities. "Do they have a large enough budget right now for the type of services I provide?"	Long-term position. Looks for partnerships that can be mutually profitable—strategically and financially. "Who can we profitably serve uniquely well, long term?"
<b>Qualifying issues</b>	What budget do you have for my type of services? Who controls it?	Can I effectively address your concerns, increase your profits, and help you win—individually and collectively?
<b>Selling strategy</b>	How do I discredit competitors or alternative approaches?	How do I become a more valuable partner for my client?
<b>Reason for doing business</b>	We have strong expertise and systems that have worked for others.	We are uniquely qualified and committed to your success.
<b>Client benefits sought</b>	Short-term results	Long-term advantage: "Let's increase your capabilities and secure sustainable advantage."
<b>Role of salesperson</b>	Business getter	Business and relationship developer
<b>What is sold</b>	Service contracts	Profits and enhanced capabilities

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results, they want a committed partner who does more than just render services, a partner who will serve a number of roles beyond that of industry and technical expert. These include:

- **Confidant**—someone who listens with great depth and empathy and who can keep a confidence
- **Mediator**—someone who can understand the differing internal perspectives, who helps craft a consensus that rises above the internal politics, and who brings people together for the right reasons
- **Teacher and empowerer**—someone who helps clients upgrade so they have greater control of their destiny and can make better decisions in the future
- **Role model**—someone to look to as an example of how to manage time, build relationships, lead meetings, listen, coach, etc.

In addition to performing many roles, a consultative partnership requires a commitment to maintaining the health of the relationship. Some aspects of this include:

*Avoiding surprises.* Beyond avoiding financial and project-schedule surprises, clients need to be warned about potential pain that will be incurred (e.g. likely internal resistance, transition problems while new systems are being implemented, etc.). They need enough warning time to prepare a response.

*Getting our hands dirty in the trenches.* We need to join in some of the internal battles to make the project successful. Sometimes this involves taking on an unpleasant persona, being the bearer of bad news, or developing strategies to help individual managers maneuver through the political battles.

*Being emotionally supportive.* This includes paying attention to the client's challenges and frustrations of implementing changes and providing occasional one-on-one emotional support. It may involve coaching managers through such uncomfortable tasks as reassigning staff, altering career paths, or waging internal battles.

*Being a team player.* Working tightly with the internal staff teams so that changes are integrated as smoothly as possible.

*Talking openly about the value the client is receiv-*

*ing.* This is different than simply securing agreement on compliance with the contract. There is no way that a contract on the front end can anticipate all the needs a client will have during a project. There are personality conflicts, changes of mind by senior executives, political motivations, resistant employees, and unanticipated events that impact the project. During these times of special need, clients count on us to be resourceful, flexible, and sensitive.

And, to ensure that these functions are being fulfilled, it is helpful frequently to ask the following questions:

- Is the consultant's role and style the most effective for this phase of the project? Should the consultant's visibility level be changed? Should the consultant take a more directive or more facilitative role?
- Are the support and services by the consultants and internal staff meeting the needs of the project? "Are we getting what we need from all the players for this to be successful?"
- Is the decision maker receiving the hands-on assistance needed to create victories? This can involve raising issues at key meetings, being a courier of confidential messages, evaluating personnel, mediating disputes, etc.

Our job is to create victories for our clients. Frequent and frank conversations allow us to be more powerful allies with our clients as well as to make more effective midcourse corrections.

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## ***Developing Future Opportunities***

How we approach the issue of future work with the client heavily influences the client's perception of us as either an "expert selling services" or a partner committed to the client's success. Clients can be particularly sensitive to our raising the issue of more work while we are working on a project. How do we search for more work while implementing a project?

One method that has worked for me has been to list the major players in an organization and the major challenges and opportunities facing them. By presenting this analysis in the framework of sharing and confirming observations, the dialogue is perceived as honest and



**Figure 2 PAST AND PRESENT CONSULTANT CHARACTERISTICS**

Past	Present
Execute active agreement on budget and on time.	Continually expand what you can do for your clients; make it ever easier for them to use you and WIN.
Be pleasant and professional.	Go the extra mile; anticipate needs of all; ensure that all parties are well served.
Be competent.	Secure the right resources, find the right answer, develop the best solution.
Stay in touch.	Be responsive and an integral part of the team.
Keep clients informed.	Empower clients to have control of their destiny and make informed decisions.
Offer reasonable solutions.	Do whatever is necessary to Get Results.
Be a supplier.	Be the "go to" guy.

helpful. This creates an easy transition to brainstorming together about ways you can help. Simply asking the follow-up question, "How can we help?" raises the issue of additional work from the perspective of a caring partner.

The list should not focus solely on purely business issues. Ideally, you can find ways to help that don't result in new business for you immediately. These could be referrals you provide, books, introductions, or assistance on personal matters. Taking the time to have such discussions with as many major players as possible deepens your understanding of the client, reinforces your value to the client, and opens up opportunities for more work.

It also helps to position yourself as an ally who is committed to helping clients win individually and collectively. This is important in securing full collaboration on the current project and for the future. I have learned that part-

nerships with clients are formed one-on-one, person-by-person.

By leveraging our knowledge of the client, we can generate value on an ongoing basis, and the client has ongoing reasons to retain our services.

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### **Conclusion**

The bar of performance is being raised. Clients are expecting more. Note the differences in consultant characteristics presented in Figure 2.

The challenges we now face will continue to grow. With a conscious strategy of forging stronger partnerships, we not only secure more business in the short term but secure sustainable competitive advantage with targeted clients that will stay with us for many years to come. ■

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