

3 THINGS YOUR CLIENTS TELL ME, BUT THEY WON'T TELL YOU

Conventional marketing strategy says talk to your clients frequently. Build this into your marketing plans and you'll learn a lot with really no downside.

However, in a perverse bit of irony, the more your clients like you, the more they'll try to please you with what they think you want to hear. So, while they mean well, no matter how hard you try, there are a few areas where clients aren't particularly forthcoming,

The most valuable insights rarely come in the form of information that is easily accessible.

Over the past decade, I've engaged hundreds of my clients' clients in structured, yet free-wheeling conversations. Here are three valuable bits of information your clients can tell you, if somehow you can get them to really open up.

1 Why they selected your firm

"Why" contains more nuance than you expect. The elite firms I work with do consistently great work and want to be selected due to objective excellence. In a world with lots of excellent choices, excellence is no longer a selection criteria—it's become a minimum requirement. The "best" choice is highly subjective and varies between clients.

Once you embrace this subjectivity, your marketing and business development can differentiate and make your firm

very sticky to the clients to whom you are most attractive.

#2 How your clients describe their "pain"

Funny, clients think almost exclusively in terms of their own business rather than your offerings. Sounds obvious, but most professionals think from their own experiences. Re-characterizing your service in terms of benefits rather than features is a start, but the ability to see how what you do fits into your client's overall business—from their perspective—creates a bond that is very difficult to displace.

By seeing the broader picture, you'll gain a better grasp of how each element of what you do supports your client's overall business. You are helpful when you offer products or services that fit your client's needs. When you understand their business as they do, you become invaluable.

#3 Specific ways you can improve your business

It's picking low-hanging fruit to get clients to offer suggestions for improving the service they buy from you. Higher up in the tree, locked inside the heads of your most loyal clients, is something much more valuable: ideas for how you can improve your business. Your best clients want you to succeed. They understand the market, potential clients, and your competitors in ways that are often difficult for vendors to grasp.

Putting it all to work for your firm

It's hard to project expertise in your market while establishing the humility necessary to ask for advice. One big advantage I have is in not being you. It's easier for me to convince your clients there's no hidden sales pitch. While your existing client-company relationship provides the point of entry, I bring no history or biases to the conversation. Your clients are as passionate about their business as you are about yours.

So, keep talking to your clients. Accept that your best clients genuinely want your firm to be successful. However, don't fool yourself into thinking that what they tell you is the full extent of what they have to say—or what you need to hear to take your firm to the next level.

About Bruce La Fetra

Bruce La Fetra works with elite professional services firms to capture more market opportunity, use fewer resources, and generate greater momentum by adopting a strategic view for the role of marketing. Contact Bruce at Bruce@LaFetraConsulting.com or (408) 749-1028.

