

YOUR BUSINESS: *James Watson*

Your customers' trust: Earn it, keep it, cherish it

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Trust is at the core of any successful relationship, business or personal.

In business, many of us strive to be perceived by our clients as their trusted adviser; the expert in our chosen field; the individual or firm whose advice is considered the definitive word or solution to our clients' needs; and the person or firm whose every action is focused on the client's well-being. We want our clients to feel that when they deal with us, they needn't look any further for the right solution. We want to be trusted.

Trust can shorten sales cycles, minimize pricing concerns and increase your firm's standing in its market. However, trust can't be acquired. It must be earned and cultivated, one interaction at a time.

Does your firm actively cultivate its "trust factor?" In other words, do you consciously take steps to build trust with your clients and within your market?

Several weeks ago, I wrote about the importance of taking every opportunity to positively impress your clients. The trust factor takes this concept to the next level. Each customer interaction, or "touch point," is an opportunity to build that trust.

What can you do to cultivate trust? Begin by looking at your company's high-level touch points.

Do your marketing campaigns exude credibility? Is the language in your campaigns simple and believable, or does it border on sensationalism? Do you use customer references in your marketing? Marketing campaigns cast a wide impression. Be sure that it's an impression that cultivates trust.

Have your salespeople been trained to sell in a manner that cultivates trust? Or is it all about closing the deal and leaving it up to the implementation team or customer-service organization to build the trust?

Your sales representatives should instinctively begin each sales cycle by taking the time to research, ask questions and fully understand the client's needs. As author Stephen Covey said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

Listen more to your clients and they'll be more likely to listen to you.

Asking your client to evaluate your performance is another way to build trust.

Do you have a formalized process for eliciting and capturing client feedback, and if so, do you employ it consistently? Do you act on your customers' suggestions and regularly communicate those actions back to the client? Asking your clients how you can improve your services will not only build trust and credibility; it also will improve the overall value of your offerings.

Don't limit your client communications to the routine engagements around marketing, sales and the delivery of service. Engage with your clients outside of these transactions.

Do the chief executives or the principles in your organization regularly spend time calling on clients? Initiating unsolicited executive-level contact can promote a sense of "corporate caring" to your clients.

Deliver value to your client beyond that which they purchase. Arrange educational seminars or send out targeted and relevant newsletters. Any way in which you deliver additional value between transactions will add to your credibility. Showing a genuine interest in your clients' success will, in the long run, help you to succeed.

Remember those basic precepts that we were all taught early in life: Keep your promises; be on time; treat others as you wish to be treated. Empathy can be a great catalyst for building trust. Be sensitive to a client's propensity for doubt. Anticipate any doubt or concern that may arise in the mind of your client and preempt the doubt with a proactive communication.

Taking inventory of your client touch points will help you determine how well you're cultivating trust with your clients and within your market. Build trust and credibility at every opportunity. And create opportunities to build trust.

At the end of the day, people do business with organizations and people they trust. Your investment in building your trust factor will be returned exponentially over time through high-value customer relationships.

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