Your Best Future Client

Idea In Short

Your best future client is the one you already serve. Overweight nurturing and listening over broadcasting and courting, because repeat work from delighted current clients yields the highest return on investment.

Create and Keep a Customer

For all the talk about consulting, it really comes down to what Peter Drucker said 60 years ago. The purpose of a business is to create and keep a customer. That is simple and beautiful. Create means knowing your customers, knowing which customers are not for you and offering unique value. Keep means serving them well, even if they differ from you, even if they change their mind. 1

How Do You Sell B2B Professional Services

This is a fascinating topic, and all solo consultants want to know the answer. The most common refrain from successful partners is that you do not sell so much as you do great work. This makes sense but is also annoyingly obvious, because the follow-up question is how to get the first customer. It is like the cold-start of a networking problem: who buys the first fax machine? The short answer is to find non-paying or low-paying clients to demonstrate your work, like free samples at a warehouse club. The long answer is to develop a portfolio of work, deliverables, relationships, evidence, testimonials and references that speak for you.

David Maister's Framework

David Maister's Managing the Professional Service Firm (1993) is the gold standard for understanding how these firms work, and it is mandatory reading in consulting classes. Maister sees the professional services marketing process as five steps, or buckets. Walking through the chronology, it sounds like this: broadcast to generate leads through seminars, articles, newsletters and speeches; court to start the relationship with a single specific buyer; super-please to delight the customer and get them bragging about you through word of mouth; nurture to earn future business without taking the client for granted; and listen to gather marketing intelligence and understand how clients think. This is not the business-to-consumer funnel of awareness, interest, consideration, trial and purchase. It is the long and deeply personal game of marketing yourself through your words and relationships. 2

Too Much Broadcasting and Courting

Maister observes that firms often overweight the first two steps, creating a new customer. That rings true. There are tons of random networking, outgoing sales calls, request for proposal (RFP) responses, meetings and administration. Layer in digital life such as LinkedIn posts, social media, email campaigns and search engine optimization, and this becomes a large time suck. Lots of input, not a lot of focus. It is like a child throwing seeds around and thinking he is a farmer.

Super-Please Your Current Clients

The merits of doing great work for clients who are already paying you seem so obvious that it is embarrassing to type. Yet consultants can get complacent and lose their professional edge, which grows dangerous with longer-term clients and employers. Maister noted that professionals become more fascinated with the intellectual challenge of their craft than with being responsive to clients. Clients get mocked for their lack of professional knowledge, despised for their demands and resented because they control the purse strings. This is not someone else's story. We have all complained about clients, bosses or the company we work for, which is both ironic and a bit stupid. Two good reasons exist to double down on current clients. Professionally, we are measured by our work and attitude, and we are the product. Logically and cynically, super-pleasing your existing client has a high return on investment (ROI). 3

Work Is Everywhere

After 20-plus years in corporate America, there are plenty of problems consultants can help solve. One client once had four different consulting firms running around the same building. Good news: there is no scarcity of client problems, and there is enough work to go around. Bad news: it is still not easy to find problems you can help with, the right decision maker, the right way and the right time.

Do Good Work and Pay Attention

New problems from old clients are the best opportunities. If that is true, then everyone at the client site should do two things. Keep doing great work and develop a reputation for cracking tough problems, collaborating well and getting things done. Be on the lookout for adjacent problems your team could help with. Client executives often do not even know the extent of their problems, and partners and directors are not on-site all the time like you are. Everyone, not just the partners, can help spot the next engagement.

Nurture and Listen Better

Maister argues there are two activities firms should do more. Courting new clients with proposals, RFP responses and pitches keeps the pipeline alive, because without meaningful conversations with qualified buyers the pipeline dries up. Nurturing existing clients to see if they have other problems you can help with matters equally, because without asking real questions and finding new ways to add value, you trap yourself in a hamster wheel of finding new prospects and starting the conversation over again. More first dates, fewer lasting relationships. Finally, listen better. Get feedback from clients, partners, students and team members. Think of your business like Toyota's production system, where continuous improvement turns defects into lessons you can fix.

Make Listening a System

Listening to clients should not be a casual habit but a repeatable system. Schedule regular, structured conversations that ask what is working, what is not and what problems are emerging. Capture the answers in a shared log so insights survive staff turnover and travel gaps. Treat feedback the way Toyota treats defects on the production line, as signals to fix before they grow. When partners and juniors alike feed the same log, patterns surface that no single visit would reveal. This turns listening into business intelligence, because the next engagement often appears first as a faint signal in these conversations. Firms that systematize listening stop chasing cold prospects and start cultivating warm, adjacent opportunities inside their existing book of business.

- 1Drucker argued the only valid definition of business purpose is to create a customer, with marketing and innovation as the two basic functions that produce results

- 2Maister's practice development model comprises broadcasting, courting, super-pleasing, nurturing and listening, with firms over-investing in the first two and under-investing in the last three
- 3Maister argues the key talent in selling professional services is thinking like the client, asking good questions, listening and earning trust rather than asserting expertise

Summary

Business development reduces to two habits: do great work and pay attention. New problems from old clients are the best opportunities, so super-please current clients, nurture them for adjacent work and listen continuously. Everyone on the team, not just partners, can help.