Satisfaction Is Perception Minus Expectations

Idea In Short

Do excellent work, then work the equation. Raise client perception through visible professionalism and lower expectations by never over-promising. Service quality is easier to improve than work quality, so schedule check-ins, remind clients of value delivered and ask for feedback this week, not this quarter.

The Equation Behind Every Engagement

Walk out of a celebrated restaurant disappointed and you have lived the formula. The food and service were good, just not as good as the anticipation. Expectations were too high, so satisfaction fell short. Consultants live in the client satisfaction business. Happy clients pay invoices, award add-on work, provide referrals and strengthen the case for year-end promotions. David Maister distilled the mechanism into one line: satisfaction equals perception minus expectations.1 His deeper point unsettles many professionals. Neither perception nor expectation necessarily reflects reality. The work matters, and so does everything surrounding it.

Clients Are Human

There is no polite way to frame the complication. Clients are human, which makes them beautiful and messy, full of emotion and bias. The catalog of cognitive biases runs long, including confirmation bias, recency bias, the bandwagon effect, hindsight bias, loss aversion, the availability heuristic, anchoring, the halo effect and attribution bias.2 Client executives also operate under enormous pressure. Your project is not their day job. They juggle a long list of other issues, rarely control their calendars and cannot always recall what you said last time. Sometimes they forget commitments they made to you. Extend them grace, because you will need the same courtesy eventually.

Humanity cuts both ways, and the positive side deserves more credit. Robots show no courage and offer no leadership. A robot cannot persuade a skeptical business unit to adopt a new pricing platform. A robot cannot inspire employees exhausted after months of overtime. Clients with courage, thoughtfulness and goodwill do the right thing for their organizations and often surprise their advisors with trust.

The difficult side is equally real. Consultants are hired to accomplish a great deal in little time, so projects need low drama. Wonky data and tight timelines already supply enough variability. The clients who strain engagements change their minds frequently, second-guess work quality, look for someone to take a fall, miscommunicate messages to stakeholders or hire advisors for unstated reasons. Recognizing these patterns early lets teams manage around them.

Raise Perception Deliberately

The first lever of the equation is perception, and three steps raise it. Step one, do the work. Be so good they cannot ignore you. Confidence should flow from competence, the way an architect unveils a skyscraper knowing the math was checked and the construction inspected. The building will not fall, and you can say so.

Step two, put your best foot forward. Credibility leaks through small holes. Arriving late to a meeting, shipping a typo on the first page or copying the wrong person on an email jeopardizes reputation and stalls change management momentum for no good reason. Polish is not vanity. Polish is evidence.

Step three, extend the standard to your team. Everything the team does, says or writes reflects the firm's brand, exactly as branding theory predicts. Behavior in the hotel lobby travels. Someone from the client site will hear about it, so professionalism must hold around the clock.

Lower Expectations Reasonably

The second lever is expectations, and the rule is ancient. Do not over-promise, in consulting, in life and in marriage. If you cannot guarantee arriving home by six, say so up front. The temptation to inflate promises grows strongest during business development. You do not know what you do not know, hunger for the win sharpens the pitch and new

relationships carry a spark of optimism. Maister captured the aftermath:

> "The most depressing day in the office is the day after we have won a new client. We look at each other and say, 'How on earth are we going to deliver all that we promised for the budget we agreed to?'"

Conservative promises prevent that morning-after meeting. They also set up the pleasant surprise that drives referrals.

Quality Work Is Not Quality Service

Maister's most counter-intuitive insight separates the work from the service. Products are consumed while services are experienced. A team can deliver solid technical work, yet if the client never perceives the quality, the verdict is bad quality. Professionals resist this truth because craft fascinates them more than responsiveness. Maister diagnosed the syndrome sharply:

> "Because of the proclivity of professionals to become more fascinated with the intellectual challenge of their craft than with being responsive to clients, all too often clients are mocked for their lack of professional knowledge, despised because of the demands, and resented because they control the purse strings, and hence the autonomy of the professional."

What you do matters, and how you do it matters just as much. Service quality research reaches the same conclusion, since clients evaluate reliability, responsiveness and empathy alongside technical outcomes.3

Service Is the Easier Upgrade

Improving service quality costs far less than improving work quality, which makes it the

highest-return investment on most engagements. Clients differ in their preferences. Some want detail and a seat in the decision process while others want a monthly update. Both groups want good service tuned to their rhythm.

The practical agenda for any week looks like this

- Reach out by email or phone rather than running silent on the project
- Schedule the next check-in meeting now and assign yourself due dates
- Remind the client of the service delivered and the service still coming
- Ask for feedback on the team and hunt for new problems to solve
- Coach junior consultants to recognize add-on opportunities

Each action shifts perception upward without a single additional hour of analysis. The equation rewards those who manage both of its terms.

- 1David Maister
- 2List Of Cognitive Biases
- 3SERVQUAL

Summary

Satisfaction equals perception minus expectations, and neither term necessarily reflects reality. Deliver excellent work, present it flawlessly, promise conservatively and serve attentively. Improving service quality costs less than improving work quality and pays faster. Manage the equation deliberately on every engagement.