Paid to Worry

Idea In Short

Accept the core transaction: clients outsource their problems and their worrying to you. Deliver results, explain your process when things slip, answer every message, avoid surprises and never care less about the problem than the client does. The best consultants worry about client problems on weekends.

The Core of Client Service

Consulting is a service profession, which at its core means only one thing: there is a client. The consultant does the work, worries on the client's behalf, makes the client's life better and serves. The formulation is ramen-simple, and it decides everything: it is not about you, it is about the client. Clients outsource their problems and, crucially, their worrying. They may want involvement in the solution, and fundamentally they are paying to hand the problem over. A consulting partner's line captures the standard perfectly: you want to hire consultants who worry about your problems on the weekend.1

Easy to Say

Every company extols its customer focus, especially during the marriage proposal and engagement phase of the sales cycle, when bragging costs nothing. Billions of marketing dollars go to selling consumers a first-date promise of great customer experience, in what Seth Godin would call shouting.2 The hypothetical vendor pitch is so trite it hurts: we're different, we're focused on customer service and exceeding your expectations. The websites of vendors about to be fired reliably display the same promising phraseology, partnership, tailored services, clear communications, which mostly sets expectations too high. The satisfaction equation collects the debt: satisfaction equals perception minus expectations, and inflated promises borrow against a future the service never delivers.

Should Be Easy to Do

The economics argue for obsessive existing-client care. Intuitively, existing customers are the best source of new business, and most consulting firms earn more than 90 percent of revenue from existing clients, since there are only so many Fortune 500 companies. David Maister's two-by-two makes the priorities explicit, ranking existing clients with identified needs as awesome and existing clients with unidentified needs as soon-to-be-awesome.3 His advice follows bluntly: do not worry about new people, and spend the overwhelming majority of non-billable time making existing clients rave, because that is the best, highest-return business development there is, and general counsel talk to each other. The mechanics of a cared-for client compound naturally. You understand her, what makes her successful and how she works; when you call, she answers; the teams know each other, and a three-to-four-year track record starts turning a flywheel.

Rarely Done Well

Real vendor firings teach the failure catalog, and any given month can bring several, in sizes from hundreds to thousands of dollars. Five symptoms recur. Poor results come first, because in a world calibrated by companies that almost never fumble, clients expect the job done well, on time and at reasonable cost. Unclear process compounds imperfect results, since customers forgive errors that get honest root-cause explanations and mutual gap analysis, and they do not forgive sloppy answers to the question of how the error happened. Poor communication is the giveaway freebie: missed emails, texts and calls, from vendors somehow active on social media thirteen times a day while ghosting the client. Surprise violates the consistency contract, because a client wants what was discussed and scoped, welcomes a modest 15 percent extra and never wants swings of half the scope in either direction; junior consultants and new vendors must earn the right to get creative by first demonstrating bullet-train consistency. The fifth symptom is the original sin: a laissez-faire attitude, the moment the vendor visibly cares less about the problem than the client does. Everything else follows from that inversion.

Worry, Operationalized

Worrying on the client's behalf sounds like temperament and works better as a system. Keep a live register of each client's open concerns, reviewed weekly, so nothing depends on memory or mood. Send the unprompted update before the client wonders, because the message that arrives ahead of the question is worth five that answer it. Flag risks early and small, since clients forgive problems surfaced at 10 percent that would end relationships surfaced at 90. Set personal response-time standards for messages and hold them on travel days, when standards usually slip. And after every delivery, ask what else is worrying the client this quarter, converting closing conversations into the next engagement's opening. None of this requires anxiety, which burns out; it requires structure, which compounds. The vendor who systematizes worry outperforms the one who merely feels it.

The Worry Checklist

The standard turns inward as a professionalism audit worth running regularly. Reach out to direct and indirect clients to see what else you can help with. Check the inbox and the task list for over-procrastinated items quietly aging into apologies. Show operational transparency, letting clients see how the cake is being made so they do not have to worry in the dark. Provide feedback to people you want to improve before their work crashes rather than after. And collect testimonials and referrals, since willingness to rave is the truest measure of whether the worrying was felt. Every consultant has also been a client somewhere, with their own story of a hired professional who let them down, which is exactly why the discipline matters: the standard you resent as a customer is the standard you owe as a vendor. Worry accordingly, weekends included.

- 1Customer service
- 2Seth Godin
- 3David Maister

Summary

Service means one thing: there is a client, and you worry on their behalf. Vendors get fired for poor results, unclear process, ghosted messages, surprises and laissez-faire attitude. Guard existing clients above all, since raving clients are the highest-return business development that exists.