

Why you are valuable -- in your clients' words

Communicating to potential clients how you deliver value is important. To do so, you need to know how you deliver value and have compelling, client-friendly words to use.

If you ask your current and recent clients, they can tell you about how you add value, beyond your core professional service. Perhaps something about how you deliver or in the quality of the relationships you develop within the client organization makes you more valuable for them than other options. For example, a communications consultant discovered through client interviews that what her clients really valued was "you make me think." She changed her marketing to reflect that benefit, and found clients who valued what she actually provided.

To find out what makes you special you might want to ask some clients some questions.

Who should you ask?

You should ask long-standing still-active clients, or former clients. For clients for whom you've done larger projects, try to talk with 2-3 people at the client, because different people may have different perspectives.

What could be the questions?

Here are some ideas:

1. What did we do for you -- in your words? I'd like to hear how you describe it (This lets them take a first shot at describing the value received)
2. What did you get from your engagement? (Probe for impact, payoff, outcomes, impact on the business, impact on the people, experience, knowledge, how they changed how they think about issues, what client does differently now, how client is different now)
3. How was what you got different from you expected? How was it the same?
4. Why did you pick us instead of others (or instead of doing the work yourselves)? What dimensions made the difference in your choice? Why were those dimensions so important to you? Did we perform well on those dimensions? Where did we fall short on this project?
5. What were the high points and the low points?
6. What was it like interacting with our people?

7. What could we have done better?
8. From your experience with others and other firms, how are we different?
9. What advice would you give other clients on getting the most from us -- what did you discover you need to do to be a great client for us?
10. What kinds of firms would be great clients for us? What are the characteristics of organizations for which we are the perfect fit?
11. What else can we do to be more valuable to organizations like yours and people like you?

Who should ask the questions?

You want a non-defensive but knowledgeable interviewer. If the person who led the work can be non-defensive, get honest answers, and hear them, then the project leader would be an excellent interviewer (but often the project leader can't meet all these requirements). In a firm with multiple people who lead work, perhaps your clients can be interviewed by another project leader. Or a senior leader of the firm. Or you can get outside help to do these interviews.

What can you do with the results?

First, you can make any necessary changes in what you do. You might discover that these clients aren't happy with everything that happened, and that you can make changes for the future.

You can also understand how to better talk about what you do. These interviews will provide distinctive, factually supported evidence of what makes your firm different; you can highlight these differences along with your mastery of your core professional service. You can make these differences part of your personal pitch, your marketing or your proposals. And you can figure out how to make them concrete and visible to prospective clients.

What to do this week

Think about whether there are 2-3 clients you could interview in this way, as an experiment. When you find what you hear is valuable for you, you can expand the program. Figure out which people you'd talk with, and set up a time to do it.

What are these tips?

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