Putting Clients First

Bridging the Gap Between Client Expectations and Firm Services

BY: CHRIS CAMARA

It's often said that accounting is a relationship business. While partners regularly talk about their deep connections with clients, in many cases those clients are not all that loyal, experts say.

Given this disconnect, when partners pass their clients down to someone else in preparation for retirement, they may overlook the very real possibility of client attrition. The firm may lose those clients by failing to ask if, when and how they want to be involved in the transition, say consultants **Katie Tolin** and **Judy Bodenhamer**, two of several presenters at a recent conference by the Association for Accounting Marketing who spoke about client experience as a differentiator among firms offering similar services.

The client experience theme was also explored by **Michelle Golden**, a growth and profitability consultant and founder of **Fore**, who encouraged firm leaders to stop taking orders and start listening to clients, and **Chad Person**, CMO of the outsourced marketing firm **yorCMO**, who emphasized looking from the outside in to close the gap between what clients want and a firm's ability to meet those needs.

It's all about putting clients first. While partners may believe they're already doing that, data shows a different story. Take succession as one example. The 2022 IPA Practice Management Report shows that only 42% of the nearly 600 firms in the survey have succession plans in place for the CEO or MP. That number suggests that plans for promoting and replacing partners may be even less common and ensuring clients stay with the firm during partner transitions may be an afterthought.

CLIENTS WANT A VOICE IN PARTNER REPLACEMENT

Partners may believe that clients have so much trust in them that they'll therefore be content with their choice of a successor upon retirement. In truth, it's one of the most likely times for clients to shop around, and the competitor who's been wooing that client for five years or more may get the job.

Tolin, president of **CPA Growth Guides**, and Bodenhamer, founder of **Client Experience Group**, asked firm leaders and firm clients to answer a LinkedIn survey on client involvement in succession planning. All 31 firm respondents believe it's important to involve clients and the 18 client respondents got specific about how. The top response was, "I want to ensure the new person is a good personality match for me." People make business decisions for personal reasons after all. A close second response was, "I want to interview the partner recommended before assignment to my account."

Tolin and Bodenhamer suggest involving all members of the succession team, including operations, and asking clients what role they want to play in succession and the skills they're looking for. Some may want strong negotiators; some may want a strong bench. The benefits extend beyond retaining the client – it could differentiate the firm, attract experienced hires and improve retention as team members see they're part of a bigger plan.

"When you start to get the client feedback about this, partners are going to listen. They're going to start to say, 'Hey, this is very real to the client, we can't just shove somebody in there that's been the heir apparent," Bodenhamer says. "They want a voice in this process. Give them the voice."

SUBMIT PROPOSALS AS DRAFTS TO GET MORE INPUT

Golden trains firms to adopt what she calls a "worth-based" pricing model so firms can stop worrying about price and start thinking about the impacts of their work on the client. Too often, the approach is to promote the firm's long list of services. "You have to disconnect what we care from what they care about."

Add the word 'draft' to your proposals to invite clients to discuss their hopes for the future, she advises. Start listening, start understanding their needs and emotions, and stop selling and stop taking orders. "You're trying to turn your firm into chefs, not waiters."

And then bump the price up – way up. "It's never that the price is too high – it's very seldom that the price is too high – it's that the worth is too low for that price." And stop emphasizing the amount of time spent on a project; clients don't care about that. "You cannot talk about time and elevate your offerings at the same time."

FIRMS FOCUS ON WHAT THEY CAN CONTROL

Person continued the theme, noting that accounting firms too often tend to focus on delivering services without errors, which they can control, instead of focusing on the client experience, which they can influence but can't control.

Humans are wired to focus on their perspectives, beliefs and priorities, and CPAs are trained to focus on quality, expertise, processes, procedures and predictability. But client experience is holistic, Person said, and it's about their perception of how they're being treated.

Thinking this way is challenging, and firms should reject rigid approaches and work to adapt to the changing needs of clients. "Is it about you? Or is it about the goals of your clients?" Checking in with them along the way feeds a collaborative approach, he said. Surveys are fine, but there's no substitute for direct conversations about the client's pain points, fears and goals.

Data shows that the gap between the expectations of a buyer and the ability of B2B companies to live up to those expectations is not closing fast enough. After all, competitors can offer the same services, but stellar client experience is a true differentiator, Person said. "It's simple intellectually, but it's difficult to execute."