

# How to create valuable customer relationships

I wrote this article as result of ten years of experience in growing my company through good business relationships. I made the mistakes, but I hope I learned from them. This is the essence of dozens of books I read about that topic and loads of practical experience. I am not a professional writer and English is not my native language, so please just ignore the bad style and try to focus at the content :-)

Let's get straight to the topic...

First and most important: Really care about your clients! If you don't care about what you are doing and for whom, you shouldn't do what you are doing in the first place since you will never do it with your heart and thus never archive the quality that sets you apart from the rest of the pack!

Take pride in your work! Tell everybody how good your work is. Don't show off but don't be shy either. If you are not 100 % convinced about your stuff, who will be?

Talk to your clients. Try to find out who they are and what makes them tick. Have a genuine interest in people. Clients are not "the other side", they are your partners. You are in the same boat. If you can't deliver what you promise, you will lose them as much as they lose you.

That brings me directly to my next point: Don't make promises you cannot keep. Lots of sales men work like that. They tell the client whatever he wants to hear. As soon as the contract is signed, they go and get the next sale. That is understandable from their point of view but it is catastrophic for your business. Sales agents receive a commission for this one deal that they are just working on. Closing that deal is the most important thing for them. You don't just want to close a deal but win a long term relationship. My advice: Use sales people only when they are a part of your company or make it worthwhile for them to get you long lasting clients. The best way, in my opinion, is to deal with as many clients as you can yourself. It is your business and nobody has such an honest interest in good client relations as you have. You would be surprised how many customers actually appreciate your honesty when you tell them straight away: "we can't do that in this time frame". You might not get the project, but you left an impression which is much more valuable. You are

the one who did not overpromise and therefore they will ask you next time again. That is much better than under-delivering.

There are many books about marketing and consulting and sales and all sorts of other stuff out there. Read them! Nearly every book will teach you something valuable. Some will teach you a lot, and some you will read and think "this is bullshit"... but that is important as well. You learn to question things and actually recognise bullshit.

Make notes. I bought a small notebook with an even smaller ball pen. That is probably the most effective thing I ever did. A lot of time that I spend out of my office I spend driving my car. Maybe it's just me, but I get the best ideas behind the steering wheel or late at night - I don't have to mention that my little book stays with me in my bedroom as well. Well, you might point out that you can still remember whatever you thought about in the car. You will, but you have to think about it. When I write it down, I forget it and my mind goes off again. Do you know the feeling: You are lying in bed and you got this great idea. It keeps you awake, bothers you. Maybe you can't stand up because you don't want to wake your partner, maybe you just can't be bothered. There are 2 outcomes for that: First is you spent so much time awake thinking about it that you can remember it the next morning. Or you just forget it... Write it down! You will feel a sense of peace and freedom in the moment you did that. Also will your business ego tell you how great you are that you actually even work when you are nearly sleeping. Buy this notebook and: Buy a nice one. Something fancy, good looking, so you actually like to use it. I have this philosophy: When I use something very often, it should look nice. It is just positive to surround yourself by beautiful little gadgets and next time you buy one, you won't have the guilty mind.

Now down to the more practicable side of things:

Growing your business is not so much about getting new clients as it is about keeping existing ones happy and do more work for them. New clients should come via referrals. And they will, if you keep your existing customers happy. The time you spend to take care of one of your clients is still cheaper and more effective than this new marketing campaign. I am not saying that marketing doesn't have a place. But be aware that the best marketing are happy customers which run around and tell everyone just how great you are. They won't do that, you are just thinking? Of course they will. If you have an extraordinary relationship with them, they will. I am not talking about good products and services. You need that too, but here good is good enough. I am also not talking about a really great

service. Also, you need to have a great service, but that won't create the sort of clients who actively promote you. What I am talking about is the personal relationship to you customer. To every single one of them. If your customer start to trust you and to like you as a person, you have a perfect base for referrals. Only, off course if your products are good and your service is great.

Back to the relationship - think about it: Every time your client recommends you, he puts his own reputation on the line. If you mess it up, it will fall back to him. The great thing: If you don't mess it up, if you are really THAT great, it will also fall back to him. He will raise in value for everyone he sends to you, so he will be exited to do so. What a client! What a client!!!

So back to my first advice: Like you clients. If you don't... hmmm, that is a tricky one. Off course you will sometimes meet clients which you just can't stand. My advice... but that is really just my personal opinion: Tell them nice and politely that they can go to hell! The nice way is to say: Sorry, we don't have the recourses right now but I can recommend xyz. Xyz should be a very good company as well. If you don't know one like that or the client is really THAT bad, don't refer him. You might say, that is a bit drastic and that in a business world you cannot be too picky with your clients. True, true and true. If you are not in a position where you can afford that, try your best to get along with him, but for my company and also (and maybe even more important) for my inner self it is the right thing to do. I just don't want to deal with someone on a daily basis who I really don't like. That messes up my day and damages my positive attitude which I need to keep my nice clients happy. So at the end of the day, it is bad for my business.

So how do I keep my clients happy? If you are in an ongoing project, just try to do the best work possible. That sound obvious but projects can get messy and they can get out of hands. That is often not even your fault. Customers change specifications, they miss-communicate, they forget to send important information or they just have a nice holiday while you desperately try to reach them. The problem is: At the end of the day it doesn't matter what was the reason for the delay, it will always fall back to you. So try to keep track of everything you need the client to do, remind him and remind him again. Do as much as possible yourself. Introduce yourself (if possible personally) to his staff. People who have seen you in person and had a friendly chat with you are much more likely to stay in office this one hour more to gather the information you need if it is necessary. Which leads me to a little side step: No one is unimportant! Even if the girl at the desk is only doing a tree

week apprenticeship, she is an important part of your customer which you deal with using the utmost politeness and friendliness. See people as people, not as important or unimportant. Good business relationships is about making friends. You have nothing to lose and everything to win.

A good way to keep clients relationships alive is to stay in touch. It is not much different from the way you would keep in touch with an old friend. If you see something in the paper which might be interesting for him, scan it and email it to him with kind regards. If you hear something about him getting promoted or his company winning an award. Send a card - yes: paper and hand written. Just a short note. But hang on, here comes more. Set your reminder on that day and send him a short note every year. He gets lots of birthday greetings from business partners, but how many will he get on the anniversary of a major promotion and therefore remind him at his success? Just try to behave as a friend would do. Don't be a stalker, just be present until the day he might need your help again. If a long time passes between projects, try to meet in person. It is always good to look into each other's eyes again. It is a psychological thing. When you see people more often, you get used to them and actually start to like them more.

When you meet, do it right. You will often come into the situation that you have to introduce yourself and your business to a new client. Prepare! It is a bit like your office. You could paint it bright green with blue dots and have rotten food lying on the floor. But what would be the first impression a client would get? You might be a natural salesman. You might be the one others always admire and who always got the hottest girls (or boys), you might be in this elite, but chances are, you are an average chap just like the rest of us. You might be charming in your way and you might have a lot of friends, but you are no rock star. News for you: You need to be the rock star! When you meet a client the first time, he will evaluate you. He will put you into a drawer. His drawer might be the complete wrong one, but once you are in, it is really hard to make your way up. Your first impression counts. My advice: Read books and watch videos about body language and sales training. You wouldn't believe how many traps there are. A touch on the nose, a blink of the eye, a hand in the pocket at the wrong time can completely blow your chances.

Going deeper into that topic would be too much for here. Just read some books. Work on your sales pitch. The first 2 minutes are all you really need. If you get them perfect you (nearly) cannot blow it anymore. Simple things like dressing appropriately, be clean, have a nice smell and talk confident (breath from the stomach) should be obvious anyway. Kevin

Hogan provides some books and videos which deal with that topic, but there are lots of great books out there. Read them! It is just like a bright green suit with blue dots and having rotten food lying on your head if you don't know how to behave properly in a meeting with high class clients. If you are a car mechanic, it is all right to be a bit rough, although your business will still benefit from a good karma (which for me is just body language), but if you create any high profile or high value products or solutions, you have to represent yourself the best you can.

But first the basics.

Before you even start thinking about your client relationships, you will need clients. And to get clients in the first place, you will exactly need to know what you do, who you are and who your clients are. I hate to stress the topic, but a good way is actually to use a business plan. I know, evil word. Much work and not really helpful. You know what, I agree! Let's go another way: Why don't you just open a document and write down your mission statement. It should be something that you can tell people, when they ask, what you do. It should be short, but doesn't need to be too short. Just write a couple of lines that you think describes your business. That will take you a couple of days. You will read it and reread it and change it here and there. That's normal. Once that is done, you go into depth. Try to write down on a full page what you are doing. Write down, what your services or products are and where you see your place in the market. You will need to do some market research first. That is a pain, but it needs to be done. Without the information about your competition, you will have no idea how you can structure your price and what you can expect from your business. Try to find out, which of the competition is doing well and what exactly they do differently. Find some competitors that are doing badly and try to see their mistakes. Now take all this information and write it down to a strategic plan which tells you, what you got to do and what you have to avoid. You might want to think about budgets already. You can try to find out, what the competition does for marketing. You can figure out if you need staff and if so, how many people you need and so on. At the end you should sit down with all your partners and set goals. I know, that is pretty speculative, but once you set them, you will be amazed of how much more optimistic you will become. If you don't have goals and benchmarks, you are running into the danger of archiving them without knowing. After a while you will start to feel bad, because you don't develop. You do, but it doesn't feel like it. Set short term goals and long term goals. Business goals and private ones. Evaluate them regularly. You will get used to the procedure and you will feel the joy if you archive a 5 year goal at the end of your second year. It is all about self motivation, but don't

underestimate this. Doing business is hard. Also hard on the soul. There is nobody telling you, how great you are. No real reassurance. With goals, you will have something that keeps you going when the times are bad (which they will be from time to time). Puh, that was a lot of work. Now go to the top of the document and write down the following two words as a header: "business plan"!

One last advice: Get help! There are so many organizations out there that can help you. Try to find the right one. Mentors, advisors, business developers. Talk to them and hear what they have to say. It might cost you a bit of money but good advice will pay for itself very fast.

That's it. That is my short briefing about becoming a more successful business man or woman. You may use a lot of my suggestions or only one or two. The most important thing you have archived already: You began to show interest of developing yourself and improve. Just keep on doing it, think about yourself and your business and try to improve... that is what sets the successful apart from the rest of the crowd.