

The Value Of Trust, A Clients Perspective

By Joe Heller on May-14-2007 | [Networking and Relationships](#)

One of the most challenging, if not the most difficult piece of the business development puzzle in a sale is - Trust. Trust today is truly the pivotal point of building a successful business relationship. Trust is rarely tied to a product or service but it is facilitated by the person interacting with the customer. Why is this important? Because everything depends on trust and in this day and age, trust is difficult to come by.

The "trust" question arises more often with the sale of a service, simply because you cannot see or touch the product. This means, there is no visible brand, other than you, so you become the representative for quality. Because of the downward spiral of ethics in business today, it is no longer simply a matter of a product being trustworthy, you must convince your clients that you are trustworthy. What you do and how you are perceived by a potential client sets the tone for how they view your entire organization.

A recent study found that selling competencies for professional service firms are explicitly focused on defining the element of trust from their client's perspective. The study also revealed after interviewing nearly one thousand people they found that trust has three essential elements in the eyes of a future client.

Candor: Clients value honesty when dealing with a service provider. They want the person to be straight forward about what will and what won't work about their solution as it relates to their problem. They respect and appreciate your candor so if you don't know the answer and let your client know that in fact "you don't know" creates a foundation for a solid business relationship.

Competence: Clients want and need to believe that you know exactly what you are doing. They need to feel there is a low level of risk involved in working with you. Remember, because they cannot see and touch your service, your ability to solve their problem becomes the focal point for your client relationship. Your competence truly represents the product in the client's mind.

Concern: From a client's perspective, the most important element of trust is concern. Clients want to know you not only understand their problems but you have the ability to empathize with them and feel their pain. They want to know you are concerned about them and the business issues that go beyond the typical sales rhetoric it takes to land a new client.

The importance of candor, competence and concern are essential for developing trust. The absence of any one element can lose a deal. The challenge is that most people when engaged in a selling scenario is that they are not very good at demonstrating each of the three C's. In both the professional services study and in parallel studies conducted with product sales forces, the element of concern was most frequently deemed missing. Clients felt that while most professionals were competent and/or candid, when it came to concern they fell short. They were interested in making a sale as it related to their service. As a result, they failed to really listen for the prospect concerns; and when a trust breakdown occurred? Ultimately the sale broke down as well.

A quick comparison from the study, using a score of 100 as the highest level of trust shows us that service sales people consistently score a 35 on concern versus a product sales person scoring a 53 on concern. As you can see, when compared with product sales, service providers receive an unexpected surprise. They immediately fall 20 points behind a tangible or product sale in the area of concern. Yet, as professionals, they are used to thinking of themselves as deeply concerned about their clients. They are often surprised and offended if anyone suggests they don't put their clients' interests first. As the research shows, this is not how they come across to a potential client. Thus, not only do clients give service providers the lowest ratings on concern, they judge professional service sales people to be significantly less concerned about them than product sales people.

Why do clients see you as unconcerned? There are several reasons:

First, service providers listen for what they can solve rather than what is important to their clients. Prospective clients view service sales people including attorneys and accountants as sharks circling for a kill (we've all heard the jokes).

Second, service sales people are often too anxious to get to their solutions and fail to listen for the client's real problem. Service sales people are seen as very seldom viewing the problem from the client's side of the table. What's needed is an ability to demonstrate their capability, to see the core business issues, and to drive the results that exceed clients expectations.

To reinforce and ensure success of a service-based sale, the one element of trust where you need to score an A+ is concern. Not only because it is the most important element to clients, it is the only trust element that your client can make a personal valid judgment. Keep in mind, it's hard for a client to judge whether you are competent; its assumed that you should be sitting in front of him/her because your expertise in solving other client's problems. Candor isn't easy to judge either. It is tough to tell who is being totally honest and isn't exaggerating. No matter what the selling scenario, the client will always decide emotionally whether or not the sale will move forward and support that decision with logic.

Why? Psychologically, if you don't believe someone is concerned about helping you, you don't trust them. And, lack of concern translates into suspicions about their competence and candor, which influences all three levels of the trust equation. If you've ever wondered why you've lost a sale you need to consider how often clients have drawn the same conclusions about you. Trust is not a prepackaged emotion, it is something that has to be earned and it can only be developed through the interactions you have with your clients.

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