



By Amy Bingham

Treasuring Your Clients

Strategies for Weathering the Storm of a Tough Economy

The economy has us all feeling like we're on a rudderless ship. We're sailing, but the water's rough, and the course uncertain. It seems like bad news is everywhere and factors largely out of our control are driving the buying habits of our customers. We must figure out how to regain control of the vessel to reach our destination before the competition does.

Research shows when times are tough, taking market share moves to the forefront of sales tactics. As sales cycles lengthen, the theory is that targeting an account that already sees the

value of contingent labor and has a proven history of utilization is easier than convincing a cautious new user to buy. That means, now more than ever, that our client is someone else's prospect. Because we're more vulnerable to loss of market share in a soft economy, we're wise to employ both defensive and offensive strategies to achieve our growth objectives through our existing account base, protecting ourselves against loss and increasing account penetration efforts to mine new business within our existing portfolio. Because "new business" doesn't have to come just from new logos.



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Let's review two guiding principles for guarding against client defection and maximizing account penetration in a difficult economy.

Great service makes it hard for clients to justify going elsewhere, and happy customers will sell for you.

In the quest to differentiate your organization from your competitors through creative service offerings and solutions, don't overlook the importance of executing the service basics impeccably.

Think about it. How important are first impressions to you when you call a company to inquire about buying something? Have you ever made a decision not to buy something based solely on poor service? Take a hard look at what potential buyers experience when calling your office. Is the phone answered before it rings three times, by a real person? (Hint: Automated attendants depersonalize service and can turn buyers off before you even have the opportunity to talk to them.) Are your phones energetically answered with a confident, inviting

greeting? Thoughtful questions and attention to detail when taking a job order, delivering qualified candidates when you say you will, and consistently performing quality control checks all convey the message that your organization can be trusted. Your goal is to ensure your client is not just satisfied, but also is delighted with your service. Delighted clients are loyal clients – and loyal clients refer others who become loyal clients. So make sure your basic service is superior to that of your competitors, and build asking for referrals into your



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standard operating procedures. In essence, your delighted clients may become extensions of your sales team, and their referrals can help you make your month in a down economy.

In large accounts under contracts, the service basics are typically already defined for you – all you have to do is execute them well. Performance metrics and service-level agreements (SLAs) take the guesswork out of what drives the customer's satisfaction. Are you taking full advantage of the revenue opportunity these accounts offer, or do your exclusive accounts get all the attention? Does your staff roll their eyes when the office receives a VMS-generated order because they know they're competing with multiple services? In this climate, you might consider putting more energy into these opportunities. After all, someone

within the required time frame can pay nice dividends if you are willing to devote the time and energy. And if your firm is the managing vendor, keep in mind your contract can actually be an enabler for retaining the account if you perform well, offering you protection from loss since barriers to entry for competitors and barriers to exit for the client are both high.

Increasing communication demonstrates your commitment to the partnership, which strengthens your position with the customer.

Proactively reaching out to your clients becomes more important in a down economy. Your small and mid-size accounts with no barriers to exit should be those you increase contact with first. Just as you have, your com-

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is booking the revenue – and why shouldn't it be your firm? An additional bonus is the reputation your firm will acquire as a reliable supplier, which can put you in a position of strength when contract renewal time comes around. So, demonstrating your commitment to these accounts by prioritizing the orders you receive and delivering qualified candidates

petition has become more aggressive in the pursuit of new business in the current environment, and companies they have unrestricted access to are easy targets. It's with these accounts that you're most vulnerable. You can be certain your competitors are making frequent contact and presenting attractive proposals to the decision makers in the organization. Of course,



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you should have a valid business reason for calling. Historically, surveys validate that what the small to mid-size buyer values most is candidate quality. One “bad temp” can prompt this fickle buyer to call another service with their next order, so increasing the frequency of your routine quality control checks on your flexible employees working at the firm is a good idea. Make sure to ask for candid feedback on the quality of both the temporary employees and of your service. Commit to correcting any missteps, and follow through to ensure their satisfaction once you do so. Remember that very often, the most senior buyer relies on the feedback of their department heads to rate your service. It’s the opinions of these end users that matter most when companies contemplate changing suppliers, so make sure you connect with the direct supervisors of the employees you’re providing.

If your company is the managing vendor for a large account, your goal is to be one step ahead of your customer with solutions to issues they may not even know they have. Proactively seek out opportunities to increase staffing effectiveness and efficiency for your customer, and then communicate your recommendations for continuous improvement measures before the client asks for them! For example, presenting a proposal to enhance the recruitment process through technological advances or central sourcing models will position you as a proactive business partner. This kind of action may open the door to an opportunity to expand your services within the account as a result. If your organization is not the primary provider, your access to the buyers within the account may be contractually restricted. In this scenario, communicate frequently with the company managing the account relationship, and convey the priority you place on the business.

Great service and consistent communication will always top the list of what buyers value most when selecting and retaining a provider of any services. With a laser-like focus on these two guiding principles, your organization can stay on course during the storm of an economic downturn and not just survive, but also thrive. **SI**

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