To Acquire Clients At A Hare’s Speed, Move At A Tortoise’s Pace
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http://www.di-squad.com
Growing up in a pedestrian, garden-variety working class family in communist Hungary, hunting for bargains was a daily task for every family member, but mainly for my mom, as on most days she did grocery shopping on her way home from work.

Whenever she found some chicken “back-and-backside” packages in the store, she would buy a few bags.

And when she heard from her colleagues that there were some bargains in some other stores, after her arrival, she would send out either my brother or me to buy some before it would be too late.

Then she would cook some and freeze most of the stuff for future use.

You may not know it, but chicken back-and-backside, although it was very dirt cheap, had very little meat on it.

If I say it was 95% skin and bones, I’m very generous.

But with meticulous search, we always managed to find some scraps of meat too.

The parson’s nose is still my favourite chicken body part, and I’m more than happy to exchange it for boneless, skinless chicken breast on any day.

I’ve decided to mention this mind-bogglingly interesting factoid from my years of growing under the oppressing yoke of the Soviet Union (Hey, my home town and all the schools I attended were named after some pretty nasty mass murderers. Well, at that time, they were regarded as national heroes), because when we look at many consulting firms’ client acquisition processes from the buyer’s perspective, the process reminds me of chicken backs and backsides.

Pitching and persuasion representing skin and bones, and the scraps of meat, including the parson’s nose, of course, representing the parts of business development that buyers actually enjoy.

So, in this article, we look at some ways you can make your client acquisition process less salesy, so it will be more comfortable for buyers.

Let’s see...

Pay More Attention To Your Services And Less To Merely Hawking Them

Conventional wisdom says that great salespeople can sell ice to Inuits and sand to Bedouins. Well, it sounds like scumbaggery to me.
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The problem is that many consultants have learnt and are still learning sales from the old masters who are either dead or are totally out of touch with today’s consultative sales processes.

Yes, in their seminars they teach “consultative selling”, but those courses almost always end on teaching “surefire” objection-handling- and closing techniques. Can we really call that consultative selling? I don’t think so.

The kind of selling good successful consultants practise is all about connecting buyers with the right solutions to their problems.

And this is the problem here.

The most successful consulting firms offer narrowly defined and highly differentiated niche services, so there is a high probability that many buyers’ problems don’t match their solutions.

But at that point, many consultants don’t want to lose buyers, so they offer “ancillary” services in areas in which they are merely so-so, but definitely not outstanding.

Well, and they often mess up their reputation.

When consultants properly position and package their services, it becomes a lot easier to promote them because those services become more attractive to the right buyers.

What buyers see is whether or not their problems are in alignment with the problems consultants solve. If there is an alignment, buyers go to the next stage of evaluating consultants.

And this why consultants shouldn’t talk about their solutions first, but about the problems that their markets struggle with.

Let’s say, a buyer from Courageous Curmudgeons Coffin Carving Corporation wants to hire some new people.

He visits the websites of two HR consulting firms.

Let’s call Strategic Slavery Inc. HR Firm #1 and Terrific Talents Inc. HR Firm #2.

HR Firm #1’s website is all about self-aggrandisement and the firm’s world-class, cutting edge employee education programmes.

The buyer thinks to himself that he wants to hire new people not to train the existing ones.

No match. Period. Game over.

HR Firm #2’s website starts with an offer for a free cheat sheet, entitled, *15 Questions You Should Ask Yourself Before Hiring A New Employee.*

No hucksterism or chest-beating, but lots of helpful content.

Firm #1 is a clear mismatch.

Firm #2 is a clear possibility.

After downloading the cheat sheet, the autoresponder programme starts a 15-part sequence going out twice a week for eight weeks.

In every part, the firm’s HR experts elaborate on each question in some detail.

From part five on, articles end on a subtle call to action inviting readers to book a small ($5,000-
$25,000) paid project to craft a perfect talent profile and put together a recruitment strategy for this specific talent. Not a harsh pitch, but a gentle offer.

You know the difference, don’t you?

The other difference is that, when there is an expressed interest from buyers, one of the partners of firm #1 jumps on the buyer and requests an appointment in an attempt close the deal as quickly as possible.

And from then on the partner is on his way to the dreaded vendor trap.

Why?

Because he tried to speed up the buyer-to-client process to a level that is uncomfortable to the buyer.

Firm #2 is different. Its people don’t bug buyers until buyers ask for the next step in the engagement. And the next step is the onboarding process.

Some people cynically call it indoctrination, and in a way it is. It indoctrinates buyers to the way they should treat the firm. It also educates buyer about what they can expect from their collaboration with the firm.

A multi-step onboarding process is also a great part of the positioning process.

A good start for onboarding is a document called “What We Believe”.

And then continue with various other disqualification elements.

Don’t try to qualify buyers in because there is resistance.

Try to disqualify buyers out, so they have to hang in for dear life if they really want to work with you.

Pay More Attention To People And Less To Selling

We all know that revenue comes from people.

Clients who buy services and associates who fulfil those services, so clients happily pay premium fees for them.

Yet, what can we see in most consulting firms?

Partners make themselves hyper-busy fiddling with things. Things include systems and other tangible things like filing cabinets and office furniture.

But somehow they don’t have time to interact with clients and absolutely have no time to interact with their associates.

It reminds me of a section from the book of Tom Stevenson and Sam Barcus: *The Relationship Advantage: Become a Trusted Advisor and Create Clients for Life*...

“That’s us (said an IBM area sales vice president)! The first thing we ask new employees in my organization to do when we hire them is to sell!

We delegate the responsibility of acquiring relationships to
these people, and our top managers assume very little accountability for executive relationships.
We have no objective way to measure the quality of relationships they build.
We only measure their quota performance.
If they make quota for a few short years, we promote them and let them manage.
I can see now why we are so overmatched when we encounter consultants in our accounts.”

As the saying goes, what we focus on grows. So, partners believe if they focus on desks and filing cabinets, they will multiply. And that’s good because in their minds, desks, lamps and filing cabinets are assets. Well, at least from accounting’s standpoint. And assets should be grown.

Mind you, on the same firms’ websites you can read slogans, like “people are our top assets.”
Well, most definitely.

Which people? The filing cabinet salesperson or the desk salesperson?

For a moment I think of a the Landmark studies of the Harris Group

- Only 37% employees have a clear understanding of what their companies are all about
- Only 20% are enthusiastic about their teams and companies’ goals
- Only 20% understand the connection between their work and their companies’ goals
- Only 50% are satisfied with their work
- Only 15% feel they are fully empowered to execute key organisational goals
- Only 15% believe they work in a high-trust environment
- Only 17% believe their organisations foster open communication that respects differences resulting in better ideas
- Only 10% feel they are held accountable for their work
- Only 20% fully trust their organisations
- Only 13% have high-trust, collaborative relationships with other colleagues and departments

Translating this into soccer language...

- Only 4 out of 11 players would know which goal is theirs.
- Only 2 out of 11 players would even care.
- Only 4 out of 11 players would know what position they play and they are supposed to do.
- 9 out of 11 players would compete with each other while ignoring the opponent.

The other thing partners often focus on is creating new services or tweaking existing services. But not how to make those services more client-friendly, so clients actually enjoy participating in those projects, but how to make the logistics easier and cost-effective on the firm.

How to replace the senior partner project lead with a young MBA, so the senior partner can work
at a more relaxed pace? After all, as a partner, he deserves it.
The other common topic is how to upsell existing clients. It really means how to dump some extra billable crap on them regardless of whether or not they need or want them.
I haven’t met many senior partners who have 1-to-1 relationships with their associates.
I’ve recently had a project discussion with a Vancouver-based software firm, IT Glue\textsuperscript{1} that has developed a very unique documentation system especially, for IT consultancies. A system that documents all aspects of a company's IT system.
The firm’s Corporate Recruiter, Semira Amiralai told me she had 1-to-1 relationship with everyone in the firm because it’s important that people feel that they belong.
Going against “HR best practices” that state that humans should be treated like replaceable cogs, Semira treats people as human beings with their virtues and flaws.
Yes, the firm has a unique solution for IT companies, but more importantly, IT Glue’s CEO Chris Day and Semira are building an incredible community of talents that goes way beyond software.

\textbf{Pay More Attention To Yourself And Less To Selling}

In the world of real consulting (NOT mere vending), buyers by characters first and solutions later.
There are many consultants who can do what you do, but you have a unique character, and buyers either like that character or not.
For instance, I’m an introvert, so I work well with introverts. When I write sales copy, I write in a low-key non-salesy tone, so I can readers draw in gradually. I also give readers a chance to leave if they don’t like it.
And that polarises the market, which is great.
Good consulting relationships are pretty intimate. What I mean is that as clients and consultants work together, they get to know each other pretty well. Both some serious virtues and flaws come out.
And when I say, pay more attention to yourself, I mean you can let your personality fly. You don’t have to be stiff-ass business-like.
The problem is that many people drag business-like and professional under the same umbrella. But they’re different.
Business-like is how you look or seem to be.
Professional is how you are.
Over the years, I’ve had several conference calls with clients while I was working on one of my joint venture partners’ farm.

\textsuperscript{1} \url{www.itglue.com}
I was professional on the call, but was wearing boots and my butcher gear and had some spots of blood on my face and hands. And when we turned on our web cams, I’m sure my clients could see the carcasses of the animals in the background which I had just slaughtered.

But clients appreciated that I made myself available on a short notice when they had problems.

In the world of consulting, polishing your character will give you a bigger boost to success than your sales skills.

And by polishing, I mean you bring out the full 3D wide screen version of you. Don’t get stuck with the 14” black and white version of you.

Be fully yourself and polarise the market. Some people will hate you but as my one of mentors and marketing genius, Dan Kennedy is fond of saying...

“You can’t attract the right people if you’re not prepared to repel the rest.”

Pay More Attention To Client Quality, And Less To Quantity

Ask most consultancies about their #1 objective. They say something along the line of “getting more clients”.

Great.

So, they flood their firms with lots of mediocre clients with boring, mind-numbing projects.

And that’s just the beginning. As the engagement progresses, more problems develop.

For instance, payment problems...

Clients either try to negotiate the project fee even lower than at which it was accepted or try to fiddle with payment deadlines.

In my whole career, I’ve done only one project with the government and the “net 60” payment term was honoured after just over 10 months.

Then I realised that since the government is the most corrupt manmade institution on the planet, what else can we expect?

So, it won’t happen again.

The other manifestation of the same problem is when consultants market to various email lists.

More often than not, without inspecting the quality of their lists, they pay the most attention to their biggest lists.

Let’s say, there is a list of 500 generated with a white paper and another list of 50,000 generated with cold calling.

Many consultants ignore the list of 500 and focus solely on the list of 50,000.

They may know in theory that the quality of leads generated with white papers far outweigh the quality of leads generated with cold calls, but they fall for the big number.

And out of the 50,000, they may pick up a good number of clients, but most of them are of low quality.
And the 500 potential great clients are waiting to be contacted, but usually get ignored. Just remember what the wise hooker told the shy sailor: “It’s not the size of your instrument that counts but how well you use it.”

**Pay More Attention To Education, And Less To Persuasion**

Buyers have some serious concerns when selecting consultants. Those concerns are...

- I don’t know how to choose the right company in your industry.
- I don’t know enough about the products/services that your industry sells.
- I don’t know about your industrial practices.
- I don’t know how I may get screwed over.
- I don’t know what to ask salespeople during the sales process.
- I’m afraid of getting taken for a ride... again.

Knowing this, instead of hard selling, you can focus on education.

The other problem is that buyers don’t come to their own conclusions that they need your services.

But good educational content gently nudges them to coming to their own conclusions

Good educational content establishes your position as an industry expert and facilitates decision-making, so you never get condemned to doing dog-and-pony presentations and grovelling for the order at the feet of condescending and price-obsessed procurement agents.

Good education...

1. ...positions your firm as a sought-after industrial authority with valuable information to share, as opposed to just another replaceable vendor, represented by some pathetic, puking peddler. It increases your perceived credibility, trust and respect.
2. ...dramatically differentiates you from your competitors, especially from the bottom feeders who try to infiltrate the market with low prices and then using bait and switch tricks to earn a buck.
3. ...allows you to set the buying criteria in your prospects minds right from the beginning of the buying cycle. It overcomes price objections and protects your turf from the uninvited intrusion of lower priced, less qualified competitors. Kia salespeople usually don’t go to Rolls Royce dealerships to poach customers.
4. ...increases response rate to all of your communication, so you can be very selective when it comes to filling up your firm with paying clients.
5. ... injects a great amount of effectiveness into your client acquisition process by allowing you to “can and clone” your sales process and automate its delivery. It means you can have a tiny business development team that can effectively interact with a huge market.
6. ...speaks in boardroom English to offer business solutions, as opposed to subject matter [food, car, coffin, etc.] English offering technical solutions. It means key decision-makers find your information worth reading and actually understand your message, so they can act on it as their situations require.
7. ...materials get passed around among buyers’ peers, so your name starts circulating on their desks and percolating in their minds. And when meeting you as a value provider, you're treated differently from vendors who are pushing forward using their canned sales pitches.

8. ...connects you with educated buyers who become the highest quality clients. Yes, they have high expectations, but they respect the project's scope, pay your full fees on time and work with you shoulder-to-shoulder to make things happen.

9. ...is the best viral material you can create, bar none. It creates both streams of new clients and brand awareness.

10. ...effortlessly fills the gap between first contact and signed contract with the type of materials that buyers look forward to receiving, enjoy reading, glad to circulate among their peers and eager to act upon.

A few years ago, Jon Stribling coined the term Spamducation as “compelling headlines and disappointing content written by amateurs or second-rate copywriters.”

Over the years of writing copy, I’ve been asked far too often to put more persuasion into the pieces that I was writing. I’ve tried to explain that persuasion is embedded in the text in a subtle and sophisticated manner that maintains the educational tone of the piece but also adds teeth to it and generates the desired action.

Being an introvert, my writing is pretty low-key on the surface, but in a subtle way, I include all the elements that are needed to make that content effective to generate the desired end result, may that be a new subscriber, a new seminar attendee or a new consulting client.

Well, some clients try to reel their fish in far too fast, and lose it all.

There is a very good quote either from Brian Clark of Copyblogger or Chris Brogan of Chrisbrogan.com. I can’t remember the exact quote, but the essence of it is...

“Content without copy is charity; copy without content is hucksterism.”

So, just focus on good educational pieces but also make sure to include some gentle factors that subconsciously nudge readers towards making decision and take certain actions.

**Slow Down**

Be more of a tortoise and less of a hare!

One of the reasons why buyers are reluctant or even plain resistant of meeting sellers is because they know sellers try to speed up the sales process, so they can quickly pocket the money.

Buyers also know that as soon as money exchanges hands, most sellers, usually senior partners with just enough gray on their temples, vanish like a donkey in the fog, and leave buyers, that is, paying clients by then, high and dry. They are usually replaced by a team of junior MBAs, significantly lighter on both age and experience.

And the mysterious senior partner is off to chasing the next opportunity.

The problem is that by now the buyer has built a sort of relationship with the senior partner, but
now the buyer, quite rightfully, feels betrayed by the partner. He feels relegated to some junior implementers who could do the work, but the strategic direction of a senior partner is missing. At this moment, in the client’s perception, the project team of talented professionals becomes a work group. That is, a group of manual labourers who can easily be replaced at the drop of a hat.

**Be More Engaging And Less Convincing**

Although as obsolete as disco music or 4-track tapes, conventional sales wisdom talks about the famous/notorious ABC of selling, that is, Always Be Closing. Lots of sales gurus who were famous in the 80s and 90s are roaming the land teaching unsuspecting people sales methods that no longer work.

Besides, most of those sales gurus used to sell undifferentiated commodity items, so their preaching is doubly irrelevant.

Buyers don’t want to be closed.

If you feel you can help a buyer, then open the relationship and let the buyer proceed at his own pace.

What fast food and quickly acquired clients have in common is that they are the bottom of their categories, so it’s a good idea to avoid them altogether.

When buyers insist on speeding up the sales process, tell them that you have your specific pace of new client onboarding, and if they don’t like it, they can try their luck somewhere else.

And during this slowed-down process, you can cut back on being convincing and you can be more engaging.

And if you have a nice diagnosis-based onboarding process, as you get more engaging, so do your clients. They will pay attention to you because they know that if they misbehave, you instantly fire their naughty arses.

With respect of course.

Buyers have to know that just because they pay you money, you are the expert to solve their problems, and they’d better follow your process.

Perhaps as a single guy, I shouldn’t use this example, but this client acquisition thingy is like romantic relationships. The more slowly we move, the further we get.

Just heed Jim Morrison’s advice...

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“Takes it easy, baby,
Take it as it comes,
Don’t move too fast,
And you want your love to last,
Oh, you’ve been movin’ much too fast.”
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~ The Doors: *Take It As It Comes*, from the *Doors* album (1967)

And that’s all for today, folks.

With victory on high...
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