

5 steps closer to clients

by Gianni Anchois

Find and keep your best customers.

In my book "Leader\$hip, an insider guide" I discuss how difficult it is to find — and keep — the right clients. In this post, I dig deeper and provide 5 simple tips on how to engage with your customers and enjoy a long and successful relationship.

#1: clients are social animals.

Stop treating them purely as a source of revenues. Believe it or not, customers have developed the ability to talk to each other and exchange opinions and personal experiences about you and your company.

They are not far apart islands, isolated from the rest of the world and difficult to reach. Be the one to foster the opportunity for them to talk to you and to each other.

If they talk about you — hopefully positively — they won't have time to talk about your competitors.

#2: be where your (potential) customers are.

That's the best way to learn everything there is to learn. Where do they spend their time? What's their social footprint? What do they read about? What do they write about? What's their passion? What's their obsession? What do they like and what do they despise? What are their values, their principles and their beliefs? Leverage affinities, but be prepared to sensibly compromise where there's divergence.

#3: never treat clients as friends.

Should you? Well, maybe. Maybe not. It depends.

It's just like parents: should you be "friend" with your sons and daughters? Remember that ideally you want to be in a clearly cut position to say difficult things and make hard decisions, something you can't easily do if you are friends with everybody. You want to be nice to your friends. Keep them from problems and pain. Accept that you're not going to always be nice (but you should always be polite, of course!) to your clients, in their best interest.

#4: be there when you're not expected to be.

Should you be around when clients want to vent frustration or anger or dissatisfaction? Sure. Especially if they are unhappy with others, not with you or your company!

Well actually no, you should be there anyway. But really, it's too easy to show up when everything is fine and dandy, or just on time to pick up the next purchase order.

Human beings have an innate desire for trust, in connection with our sense of vulnerability and fear of risk, but we also crave security and peace of mind. Hence as a customer, I trust who's around when I feel upset, vulnerable and at risk.

#5: understand what customers really want, not only what they need.

If you know your clients, you know what their business needs are. Ideally you know it better than they do. So it should be really straightforward for you to match your company's offering to their needs. Piece of cake.

Now dig deeper: do you know what they want?

Maybe the purchasing manager you are dealing with is aiming at saving money because that's in his performance objectives, and if he does he will get a great bonus and his family will be happy.

Perhaps the Director of Operations is looking to improve the customer satisfaction index because he want to show how he can run a day by day complex business, and then aim at a position of more responsibility inside the firm.

Or maybe the VP of sales is looking to become the next CEO so beyond showing great sales figures, she's eager to show she's got a good handle on the clients, the markets, the company's ability to delight that market (aka the go to market strategy).

Think of as many potential "want" drivers as you can. What clients ultimately require is often of an intangible nature, so focus on understanding the perceptual emotional value you and your company can provide. Just don't neglect more tangible, down to earth objectives they might have.

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In summary: conversations, place, standing, presence and wants.

By constantly aiming at connecting with your customers on both rational and emotional level, it's guaranteed that you'll be able to build a deeper, richer, stronger relationship. Practice this 5 simple steps to dramatically improve the quality and value of your customers.

Gianni Anchois is a writer, blogger and technology enthusiast, with a background in electronics engineering, computer science and marketing. He has worked at Olivetti, Italia Online, Yahoo! and Hewlett-Packard, holding international responsibilities across IT services, business management, e-commerce, sales and marketing.

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