

# THE HOLY GRAIL: BECOMING A TRUSTED ADVISOR

To be seen as a trusted and key strategic advisor is the ideal for business development and marketing professionals. But what is trust, what does it take to earn it and what do practitioners want?

BY TAMI DOWER



You've recently noticed that one of the practitioners in your assigned practice group is having trouble getting new business over the line. You suspect it's because she's a little timid in her approach with clients. As the group's business development (BD) manager, do you:

- (a) leave a flyer for Toastmasters in the tea room and hope she gets the hint, or
- (b) take her aside and tactfully help her devise strategies to boost her confidence in client-facing situations?

If you answered (b), congratulations, you're probably well on your way to being a trusted advisor. If you answered (a), you might be limiting your effectiveness and your own professional development. Putting yourself in a position where others depend on you for advice is more than just personally gratifying; it's likely to stand you in good stead when the opportunity for a promotion arises. And with the rumblings of economic doomsayers all around, now is an opportune time for the trusted advisor to shine.

"Marketers have a really good opportunity in the current economic environment to position themselves as key business advisors," says Lynette Nixon, Director of Knowledge, Innovation and Research for PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia. "Practitioners need someone who is market-savvy to be offering points of view about what the opportunities are and what they can do."

### **BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST**

Great feats of human endeavour are rarely accomplished solo, even if the record books suggest otherwise. As a Deloitte campaign highlighted some years ago, for every figure like Sir Edmund Hillary there is usually a Tenzing Norgay. More recently we've seen the long-term partnership of Barack Obama and his closest political advisor, David Axelrod.

A similar dynamic exists in the professional services environment. To become a trusted advisor, you need to be able to subordinate your own interests and objectives to those of your practitioners. Fundamentally, you need to prove that you are someone to whom practitioners can turn for solid and reliable guidance.

There is no magic formula to fast-track your way to trusted advisor status. As with any relationship, trust is something that develops over time. "You've got to go on a journey to prove yourself and then the practitioner also has to take the journey, so there is a meeting of the minds," says Lorraine Moss-Smith, Director of Marketing (Australia, New Zealand and Asia) for engineering firm Maunsell AECOM. "To do that overnight is just not what a trusted advisor is about – you've got to earn your stripes."

As David Maister, author of the seminal title *The Trusted Advisor*, points out, trust results from experiences accumulated over time. Although Maister examines the role of the advisor primarily in the context of the professional services provider

and his or her clients, his insights can also be applied to the practitioner and BD advisor relationship. "The key point is that trust must be earned and deserved," he writes. "You must do something to give the other person the evidence on which they can base their decision on whether to trust you."

As well as building up the required technical skill set, you need to master the steps of the delicate tango that must take place between advisor and practitioner. In order to be seen as a trusted advisor, you must consider the sensitivities, emotions and politics of your practitioner's situation. "Many professionals approach the task of giving advice as if it were an objective, rational exercise based on their technical knowledge and expertise," writes Maister. "But advice giving is almost never an exclusively logical process."

First, you need to recognise that the practitioner is an expert in his or her field, not yours. Peppering your speech with convoluted marketing jargon or presuming that they're aware of the intricacies of industry goings-on can lead to frustration and resentment.

On the other hand, treating the practitioner as though their input is not valuable can be equally – if not more – detrimental to the relationship. Trying to force your opinion onto a practitioner is more likely to lead to resistance than reliance.

According to Maister: "The most effective way to influence [someone] is to help the person feel that the solution was (to a large extent) his or her idea, or at the very least, his or her decision. One way to do this is to help them understand all the available options by conducting a thorough exploration of advantages, disadvantages, risks and costs. You can then gently guide them to the preferred solution."

The way you do this will depend on the personality and working style of the practitioner. "Being able to adapt your approach according to the person you're working with is critical," says Jodene Jackson, Head of Marketing at law firm Gilbert + Tobin. "Are they big picture, or focused on the details? Do they want to chat or just get the facts? You need to put yourself in their shoes, have empathy and know how to sell your message."

### **THE ROLE OF A TRUSTED ADVISOR**

Jackson suggests that partners are looking to BD professionals for assistance in building their revenue streams, fostering relationships and retaining clients. Drawing on a survey of law firm partners that she conducted last year, Jackson says they particularly rely on BD professionals to encourage them to be more proactive in client relations.

In order to fulfil these expectations, you need to have a thorough understanding of the client's needs and the industry in which the client operates. "Partners are asking us to give them direction, guidance and solutions," says Jackson. "You've got to be savvy enough to know what's going on in the market and

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**JODENE JACKSON, GILBERT + TOBIN**

**WHAT DO PARTNERS WANT?**

More than ever, partners are looking to business development professionals for advice on how to acquire and retain clients. Below are the results of a survey of law firm partners conducted last year in which partners were asked, 'What is the one most valuable thing a marketer or business development advisor can do to help you?'

1. Come into my office and talk to me on a regular basis
2. Know my clients
3. Know my practice
4. Provide assistance on client care
5. Help me get new clients in
6. Encourage me to be more proactive with clients
7. Understand the firm's strategic direction
8. Know the market I'm operating in
9. Ensure our brand means something to prospective clients
10. Give me another perspective on keeping client relationships fresh (i.e. How do I communicate and build relationships with my clients?)

Source: *Survey of 10 law firm partners conducted in 2008*  
by Jodene Jackson, Head of Marketing, Gilbert + Tobin.

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At a minimum, you should be reading the financial press, looking at recent annual reports filed by clients, and getting involved with relevant industry associations. "It's also worth reading documents such as CEO and chairman addresses to AGM meetings," says Ian McGill, a Partner at law firm Allens Arthur Robinson. "You've got to do that work and bring that to bear as you consider how to help your professional implement their client relationship plan or their personal business plan."

This means taking a proactive approach. "Often BD people can turn up with a pen and a blank piece of paper rather than a pen and some ideas," adds McGill. "You really should think about every meeting you're about to attend and work out what sort of outcomes you're hoping to achieve. The general touchstone should be achieving the KPIs in the client development plan or the firm's strategic plan."

**KNOW THE FIRM'S STRATEGY**

Having a solid understanding of the firm's strategy is another critical aspect of being a trusted advisor. "Implementation without strategy



is meaningless," says Jackson. "You have to think about the bigger picture before you start the tactics. If you're in a huge firm with multiple offices, you might not be aware of the firm's strategic direction, so you've got to ask the right questions to make sure you're not doing something that's countercultural or against the firm's strategy."

Occasionally this may require you to stand up and question directives from practitioners. Ernst & Young's Oceania Managing Partner, Client Service and Accounts, Tim Eddy, encourages BD professionals to make sure all proposals are aligned with the firm's 'big picture'. "For example, we might be in demand to provide services where we don't have the core skills. Marketing people have a role in challenging these things and saying: 'Is this really what our core business is; is this aligned to our strategy?'"

On a micro level, you also need to understand the strategic direction of individual practitioners. In some cases, this may involve engaging the practitioner in an honest and frank discussion about where their professional strengths and weaknesses lie.

"Marketers need to treat each fee-earner as a market of one," advises Sue-Ella Prodonovich, Principal of WHK Horwath's Business Development Services. "It's about understanding the pressures each fee-earner is under, what they're trying to achieve and seeing if there are ways that you can help. The first thing is to understand what has worked in the past so you can replicate it. If you can work out where their last good matters came from, you have an immediate action plan."

01. TIM EDDY  
ERNST & YOUNG

02. JODENE JACKSON  
GILBERT + TOBIN

03. IAN MCGILL  
ALLENS ARTHUR ROBINSON

04. LORRAINE MOSS-SMITH  
MAUNSELL AECOM

05. LYNETTE NIXON  
PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS

06. SUE-ELLA PRONOVICH  
WHK HORWATH

## REAPING THE REWARDS

Once a trusted advisor relationship is established, there should be a relatively free and reciprocal flow of information. According to Maister: "One of the most significant rewards of a trusted advisor relationship... is that the individuals are most able to be fully who they are. The members of the relationship do not expend energy protecting themselves and both can be open with information about their lives, their strengths and their weaknesses."

To some degree, there will always be certain boundaries that marketers and BD professionals shouldn't cross, but as the trust builds, those boundaries progressively recede. "I think if you've got it right, there's not much of a line there," says Ernst & Young's Eddy. "Clearly, you shouldn't be telling practitioners that they're technically wrong, just like we shouldn't be telling a marketing person how to be a marketing person, but you can still challenge things. If you're truly part of a team, you should be able to speak without fear or favour. In a perfect world, marketers and BD people are a seamless part of the team." ■

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**TIM EDDY, ERNST & YOUNG**

### ARE YOU A TRUSTED ADVISOR?

While there is no definitive benchmark for what constitutes a trusted advisor, some of the common traits include:

- Being a good listener
- Being reliable
- Remaining calm under pressure
- Being able to adapt your style to suit different practitioners
- Putting the interests of the practitioner ahead of your own
- Enjoying the success of others
- Not being afraid to challenge assumptions
- Avoiding 'bluffing' your way through knowledge gaps
- Understanding the firm's strategy and broader industry issues

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