

Connecting With Your Clients

By Ramona Creel

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Ramona Creel
ramona@onlineorganizing.com

OnlineOrganizing.com <http://www.onlineorganizing.com>

Many service professionals tell me that they are uncomfortable with the idea of marketing -- like marketing is a bad word! For some, "marketing" brings up images of telemarketers, aggressive sales people, and feelings of resentment at being invaded. But marketing is really about connecting with your customers. In service businesses -- particularly ones where you are very personally involved with the client -- you must build up a rapport with your prospects before you can ever hope to turn them into clients. Here are seven basic principles to remember if you want to really connect with potential clients and turn them into loyal customers:

KNOW YOUR CLIENTS

How can you sell to your clients -- much less help them -- if you don't know what their problems are? Marketing is all about SOLVING PROBLEMS -- whether your prospect wants to get a stain out of the rug or have 10,000 copies made by tomorrow or find a better way to manage paper. When you market your services, your job is not to "con" people into buying something they don't need. It is to show them how you can solve a problem for them. You're not selling a service -- you're selling a solution.

So how can you possibly know what your prospective customers need? The easiest way is to put yourself in their shoes. Since my specialization is Professional Organizing, I pretend that I am a disorganized client -- then ask myself why I would hire an organizer. Maybe it's so I can create more free time to spend with friends and family. Or it might be because I need to reduce stress and feel better about yourself. Or I might just want to be more productive during the day. That answer tells me what I need to sell -- the solution to the problem.

DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS IN TERMS OF BENEFITS -- NOT FEATURES

One of the biggest mistakes we make as business owners is to tell prospects all about the terrific features of the services we offer. I might tell a client, "I can help you set up a paper management system and clean out that closet and re-organize your daily schedule." So what? Clients don't care about any of that, because it seems vague and distant and not at all related to their situation. If you want to make an impact, tell your potential clients how their lives will improve by working with you. I'll make a greater impression on my clients if I say, "Once we are finished organizing, you will get your daily chores done faster, have more time for yourself, and find yourself in a less-chaotic environment." Those are BENEFITS.

PAINT A PICTURE

I don't mean literally paint a picture -- but if you want to market yourself successfully, you need to bring out the artist inside. What's the best way to show clients how you can solve their problems? Paint a visual picture of what life will look like after you have helped them get organized. "Imagine what your home will look like once we have it organized -- a place for everything, the piles of clutter are gone, and you are able to relax and enjoy just being in your house." That's a lot more effective and convincing than, "I can help you get your house organized."

EMOTION SELLS

Think about the last time you made an important purchase -- what really made the final decision for you? Was it logic or emotion? If you said "logic," congratulations -- you are in the minority! Emotion governs most of our behaviors and decisions -- including our purchases. Fear, joy, a sense of excitement, worry -- this is why we buy what we buy.

You might think that using a client's emotions to create a sale is manipulative. But you aren't creating a false emotion -- you are simply bringing existing feelings to the surface and illustrating how you can either enhance or dissolve those emotions. Let's look at an example: you describe how much (in dollars or time or stress) that client's current problem (a car that doesn't run right or a slow computer or disorganization) are costing a potential client -- you have connected with that person's fear and stress. Then you describe how wonderful life will be once that problem is solved -- you've tapped into hope and joy. By moving your client from a negative to a positive, you have automatically attached value to your services.

FOCUS ON THE CLIENT

What's everyone's favorite word in the whole world? Our own names! Human beings love to focus on themselves -- it's a natural trait and nothing to be ashamed of. But, as a service provider, your goal is to learn to focus on your prospect's needs. Learn how to practice active listening -- listening in a way that lets your clients know you really "hear" them. Along the way, you should ask questions for clarification and occasionally rephrase what the client has said to make sure you've got it right -- "So what I hear you saying is that you are feeling really stressed because your computer always seems to conk out on you at a crucial moment." And whatever you do, hold off on offering advice until your client has poured it all out. The quickest way to kill a sale is to jump in too quickly with the answers when you haven't heard all of the problems yet.

SHARE "WAR STORIES"

Sometimes, the best way to connect with a potential client is to let the person know that you've seen it before. Share a story of another customer you worked with who suffered from similar concerns -- and how you helped that person to solve his or her problems. Your goal here is not to make yourself out to be the hero -- blowing your own horn too much will turn anyone off. You also want to be careful about trivializing your client's experience -- don't be glib ("Oh, that's no big deal -- I've taken care of that problem before!") or dismissive. What you want to do is reassure your prospects that they are NOT ALONE. That others have been in the same situation and triumphed. Show your client that it can be done.

MARKETING IS SELLING YOURSELF

In any service profession, you are selling more than your services -- you are selling yourself. You must convince the client that you are the proper person to help solve their concerns. That means being GENUINE -- not putting on a facade just to win the sale. Try too quickly to be a client's savior, and you will alienate a potential customer. You will earn your clients' trust quicker by showing your

true self than by being a "salesman." Selling yourself also involves building credibility -- by following through on your promises, being punctual, respectful, professional, and compassionate. Certainly, showing off your many glowing testimonials will impress your clients -- but actions always speak louder than words.

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