What to do after "The Call"

Building Client Connections in the New Normal

Professionals are learning to navigate a post-COVID work environment which presents challenges to building and maintaining client relationships.

Flush with work, buzzing with proposal activity and booked with meetings in January, now consultants are emerging from their home quarantine facing slashed budgets, canceled projects and delayed meetings. Firm partners and senior staff are feeling the pressure to find work for their teams and fill the growing void. In this three-part series on business development tactics, I will share some suggestions on how to make your client interactions most productive.

Part 1: After "The Call"

Hopefully you were concerned enough about your closest clients and past clients to have already checked in on them to see that all is well with their health and their family, ideally via email followed by a scheduled catch up call. To your surprise more than half of the people you sent a kind inquiry responded positively from hearing from you. 20% of them even agreed to a ZOOM call, which again to your surprise went well. You are happy that you checked in on them and are pleased that you now feel more connected with some. That content quickly dissipates when you ponder what now? You didn't talk about work much, because the conversation was more personal so you don't have anything to follow up.

First, kudos for doing the right thing! Being personally concerned for your clients' well-being and showing it - - that's it. No ulterior motive or fishing-for-work questions on that call. Perfect!

While the need for cultivating opportunities may feel high now, fight the urge to "sell". Continue being genuine and focused on their needs. While the world has changed, the

basic principles of cultivating relationships hold. You have to be personal to build a connection. Here are 10 ways to get personal:

1. **Share Something Relevant.** Depending on your past interactions with your contact, the "something" could be recent regulations, technical articles or job moves of mutual friends. It could also be recommendations for interesting videos, take out restaurants or crafts for kids (check out Crafty Panda!)
2. **Show Your Emotional Support.** If they got promoted just before the world closed, send them a congratulatory gift of craft beers, wine or a restaurant gift card. If they had a baby or recently got married, send them an appropriate recognition for their happy event.
3. **Facilitate an Introduction**. Everyone is tired of talking to the same people and would welcome engagement of new contacts! Senior leaders are seeking opinions of their peers on how to handle business disruptions and bringing workers back. Think of someone that your client would benefit from knowing and facilitate an introduction using a three-way videoconference call with you participating in the conversation. The introduction helps 3 people - - your client, your related contact and yourself.
4. **Ask for Advice.** Now might be the perfect time to write that article that you have been meaning to do. Don't lock yourself in your office to think of your topic alone! Talk to a few clients to learn where they need more information. When three clients bring up the same request, you have a winner topic.
5. **Conduct a Survey.** Identify a hot topic and interview several clients. This gives you two opportunities to reconnect - - 1-when you gather the information and 2-when you present the findings.
6. **Publish an Article with Your Client.** Clients oftentimes benefit professionally from publications as much as consultants. For example, your law firm partner client would love to co-write an article that she can share with her corporate in-house counsel clients! By including your client in your publication effort, you are helping her and yourself.
7. **Send Articles.** While you can increase your visibility by tagging articles on social media, this approach has limited benefits for cultivating specific clients & prospects. Consider sending the article with a personalized note expressing the relevance to your contact.

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8. **Request a Debrief.** If you recently completed a project or were near completion before the lockdown, ask your client to provide you with a debrief on the project and your team so you can learn how to improve and exceed their expectations.
9. **Invite to an Event.** Consider inviting them to attend a virtual presentation or participate on an industry panel discussion. You now need to consider "social distancing" activities that you can invite clients to attend. Shift to activities where you can spread out like bike rides, fly fishing excursions, outdoor farmer's markets, clay shoots or painting classes --- - previously viewed more as individual or small group interests. You can also consider starting a book club or writer's workshop and invite clients to attend virtually who have similar interests. (Not sure if your client loves to read novels? . . . then you don't know your client well enough! That's for the next topic though. . .so stay tuned.)
10. **Participate in a nonprofit**. Community organizations need volunteers and financial support more than ever now. Ask clients with similar passions to join you in helping in your community.

Building client relationships is like investing. It's for the long haul, not for the short hit. For that reason, if you do the right things frequently enough, you will succeed. Be helpful. Who said that nice guys finish last? Look around; most people think that rainmakers are pretty nice guys!

About the Author: Mimi Spangler is President of Harding & Co, which specializes in providing sales training and coaching exclusively to technical professionals. Harding & Co has spent over 25 years studying how the most successful professionals generate top revenues through interviews with hundreds of partners and practice leaders. The firm's early research findings were published in three, best-selling books, *Rainmaking, Creating Rainmakers* and *Cross Selling Success*. Their research debunked the myth that you have to be extroverted to be successful in selling professional services. For information on Harding & Co fully virtual training and coaching visit www.hardingco.com.