

Best Practices in Risk Management

Love Me Tender: Maintaining the Client Relationship

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Summary: Since our clients are our greatest assets, there is no better way to close out the year than to discuss the architect-client relationship. Architects covet repeat clients, for they represent love, loyalty, and low marketing costs. Repeat clients do not require expensive wining and dining. They trust and value you enough that they just call you up and tell you they want you to do another project; and, by the way, the kick-off meeting is tomorrow.

*Love me tender,
Love me sweet,
Never let me go.*
—Elvis Presley, 1956

What must you do to enjoy this wonderful benefit? You only have to endear yourself to them through great service, on-time deliverables, and, most of all, convincing them that you will give them what they want, when they want it, and in a way that fulfills their every wish and need.

It's a simple task, eh?

It may be simple, but it is not easy. The hardest part for most practitioners is in understanding the process. Maintaining the client relationship can be a fine art. It takes your entire crew to meet expectations and deftly deliver. One disappointing employee action and you may be out of the hunt. But when the process works, it is a wonderful thing. There are firms that have rates of over 90 percent in repeat clients due to their client maintenance process.



It may be simple, but it is not easy

Ninety percent is pretty amazing, right? Well, maybe, but it is more a matter of human nature. We are all consumers of goods and services, and our behavior regarding service delivery is quite consistent. We want the people we turn to for products and services to set realistic goals, we want them to keep our best interest at heart, and we want them to deliver their product or service as promised. No more, no less. In this respect, our clients are just like we are.

This article will examine the art of maintaining the client relationship. It will explore what it takes to convince an owner that you should be their one and only architect. But such a position is not easy to come by. It is borne out of service behavior that leaves no

doubts or hesitation. If you desire this status, it is a discipline that you must passionately pursue with your total effort and stamina. And, if you are successful in your endeavors, you may find that it becomes your life blood.

I promise

Your contract with the client is your promise of what you will deliver. It is during contract negotiations that many architects set themselves up to under deliver on the promises they make. Most clients have lawyers who argue for stringent clauses. The days of signing an AIA form contract without some revisions are basically over. You should be cautious in what you agree to give your owner under your contract and promise only what you know you can deliver. Remember, you are obligated to deliver what is enumerated in your contract, and you will be judged accordingly.

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Your contract with the client is your promise of what you will deliver

If you agree to conditions that are beyond typical basic services, you may not be able to deliver without incurring increased risk. You should always consult legal counsel when negotiating service agreements. If you do not have an in-house counsel or retained counsel, ask your insurance representative for assistance.

Only you can make this world seem right

Only you can make the darkness bright

—The Platters, 1955

Only you

Clients want to believe that they made the best decision when they selected their architect. Hopefully, you have convinced your client through past performance or in your recent marketing presentation that you are the best architect for their job. If you feel that you have not, you may need to follow up with some dynamic and compelling exhibitions of excellence. The bottom

line is that you must instill in your client the unchallenged belief that they have made the right decision.

And they're off

Clients want to know that you will jump on the project with a full initiative. When the starting gun is fired, the client expects the design team to begin producing results immediately. It is important to give back tangible results to owners frequently so they will remain calm and satisfied. For example, many architects do not report to their clients between design milestones. Extended periods of time with no communication may be interpreted as inaction. Therefore, it is important that your progress be tangibly reported to the client through drawings, documents, reports, or at least verbal updates to assure them that you are on the track and running.

Signed, sealed, delivered

For clients to be happy, you must deliver reasonably on time. The best way to improve your chances is to avoid promising unrealistic delivery dates. It is far safer to disappoint the client up front by extending their desired delivery rather than let them down

when the results are due and expected. Moreover, some clients are simply not prepared to move as fast as they have projected. In such instances, a more service oriented approach may go beyond explaining schedules and include services and support to help the project get started.

For clients to be happy, you must deliver reasonably on time

Deal or no deal

Clients must believe that you are the best "deal" for the services provided. This does not necessarily mean they are looking for the lowest fee. When the client feels that they are getting real value for their money spent, they will be less inclined to shop around on the next project. Real value includes not only established expertise in a building type or building system, but it also includes an established understanding in how building types and systems relate to the client's business. When clients know they do not have to explain programmatic issues to you at project kick-off, they will more likely feel that you are their best deal.

Can you see the real me, can you?
—The Who, 1973

Know the real me

Clients must believe that you know who they really are. Kids' names and birthdays alone are not enough. The more you know about the intricacies of their business, the more likely they will feel that you can serve them in the way that they want. If they feel you know their business intimately, they will be more prone to trust you in providing them with your design services. Time spent gaining knowledge of a client's operations, culture, and business philosophy can be valuable in instilling this level of confidence.



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Beck and call

Being accessible to the client is paramount. We have taken calls from clients as we stood with our family looking over the rim of the Grand Canyon, or as we rode the fantail in search of spectacular blue marlin. You may think it inconvenient to be constantly accessible to your client, but the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. In addition to providing good service with quick responses, if you are in frequent contact with your owner, you will interact at a personal level that transcends ordinary business and is more meaningful to them. You will also know upfront if a problem is developing. Give them your cell phone number and e-mail address. Clients must feel they have a close working relationship with you if you expect their repeat business.

Most clients will not call you at nights or on the weekend when they know you are not working. Nonetheless, a short phone call from your client when you are on the golf course or on the boat is a minor sacrifice compared to the benefits gained.

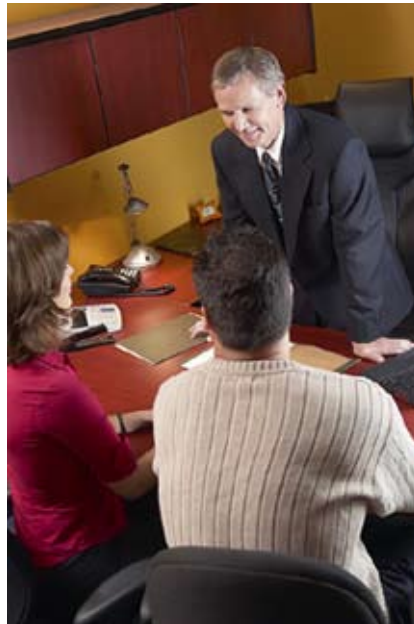
*Strap yourself to a tree with roots
You ain't going nowhere
—The Byrds, 1968*

Ain't goin' nowhere

Clients must feel comfortable that you are stable and established in your market. No one would buy a new automobile if the car company may likely not be around next year. The age of a firm reinforces the perception of stability, as do other factors. A stable workforce, repeat business, design awards, a comfortable backlog of work, and a strong industry reputation can support the perception of your business sustainability. The more the owner is aware of these, the better he or she will feel about obtaining your services. Clients are more likely to

include you as a regular part of their routine if they believe your company is stable and your future is bright.

Clients must feel comfortable that you are stable and established in your market



Problem addict

Clients want a comfort level that problems will be reasonably resolved. This can usually be achieved best by demonstration. Responding quickly to problems as soon as they arise can establish your value and dependability. Clients frequently are not as experienced in design and construction and, when problems arise, will appreciate having you available to help, even if the problem belongs to someone else. Although the problem may not be your problem, you can assist them in finding the right person to call.

If your problem should escalate to a dispute or litigation, endeavor to remain in the solution loop with your

client. It is important to communicate closely with the client during the resolution process. Even if your position is adverse to the client's, remaining in communication and working toward a resolution will demonstrate your good faith efforts and your concern for the owner's best interest.

Same ole, same ole

When you are staffing projects for repeat clients, it is important to continue to present them with the same players whenever possible. Encourage your staff to take "ownership" in the project and represent the firm to the client as though it were their own. Clients want to be able to rely on a known and experienced project team. When the client knows in advance and is comfortable with the people who will be on their project, they will be more likely to give you repeat business.

Moreover, working with clients on a continuing basis fosters friendships that transcend the current project; relationships bond and comfort levels stabilize. Although business is still business, a friendly business relationship helps smooth rough times and calm differences. It even makes some of the chaotic process fun. A longtime repeat client once told us, "Life is too short not to work with friends."

"Life is too short not to work with friends."

Serious investment

Clients, from time to time, may ask you to do work that you believe is not in your scope of services. Keep in mind that it is as natural for them to ask such things as it is for you to believe they are taking advantage of you. So, before you start threatening punitive additional services requests or fire off a nasty e-mail missile, look at the big picture and think about



what is at stake. Are the few hours of service required in writing the meeting notes the contractor was supposed to write or researching an owner's substitution request really the straw that breaks the camel's back? It is likely not. When these nagging little issues come up, drag out our article from last year entitled "Zen and the Art of Construction Administration" Part I www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek05/tw1007/tw1007bp_zen1.cfm and Part II, www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek05/tw1014/tw1014bp_zen2.cfm breathe deeply and relax. Log the time involved in the nagging little thing under the heading of, "Client Investment," and rest easy that you are moving toward becoming an indispensable resource to the client.

Look around your office at your valuable employees, new computers, boxes, and papers. Everything you see is supported by the fees you earn that the client pays. Your clients are your prime assets upon which all else in your business depends. Find a way to serve your clients beyond their expectations, and you will also find an easier, happier way to practice.

*Well love is love and not fade away
—The Rolling Stones, 1964*

Conclusion

Clients are just like you and me. They want the same things that anyone wants who purchases services. Think about the customer service responses that you have experienced. What did it make you think about the company? If the customer service representative blew you off or gave you an unintelligent response, did you feel good? Of course you did not.

We want to feel that the services that we purchase are worth the money we spend. Do you go back to the same hair stylist? Why? Apparently you think that she or he knows enough about you personally to take care of your needs. Did you ever notice that the hair stylist remembers your name? What service providers have you been loyal to in the long term? Think about why you have. If you expect your clients to repeat, you must instill in them the same constants that you expect in services provided to you.

There is a firm that recently celebrated a Twenty-Over-Twenty event. It was an occasion where they invited 20 clients who had given them repeat business for more than 20 years to attend a celebration in their honor. What a great accomplishment! But the real gain was having the clients at the celebration meet and mingle with the other 19 attendees. They realized that they were among a group that had been treated very special. They realized that they were in an elite group of clients who had come to the same conclusion about that architecture firm.

So as you are preparing for that client interview and rehearsing your pitch, remember that it is what happens after the interview that really counts. The way that you service the client, if you are successful, is what can grant you repeat status.

Repeat business is a reflection that you are accomplishing service excellence in a caring and concerned way

Remember that repeat business is not merely the goal of maintaining a great relationship with your clients. Repeat business is a reflection that you are accomplishing service excellence in a caring and concerned way. Care and concern for your clients cannot be presented in a marketing meeting. It must be reflected in your attitudes and actions as you provide your professional service. And as you save your PowerPoint and reach for your leave-behinds for tomorrow's marketing presentation, think about that call last week from your old friend John when he hired you to design another one of his projects, and don't forget to be careful out there.

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Looking forward

Future Best Practices in Risk Management planning indicates that 2007 should be another active year. We will kick off the year with "Top Gun: Targeting, Resolving, and Closing Problematic Issues," where one of project management's most vital activities, solving problems, will be examined. We also plan to look at the often misguided view that architects take on a fiduciary duty when certifying contractor payments in "The Fiduciary Menace." We will again examine the vanishing romantics of our industry in "Raiders of the Lost Art," and we will look at the importance of documenting owner decisions in "Cast in Stone." We will review the remarkable strength and dynamics of a unified project team in "The Power of One," and we will look at the underbelly of project final completion as we did in "Substantial Completion, Where Art Thou" www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek06/0127/0127bp_risk.cfm back in January. These topics, along with a few others, should make for another exciting year as we turn over more rocks on the risky side of our profession.

Reference:

This series will continue next year in *AIArchitect* when the subject will be "Top Gun." We will explore the process of targeting, moving in, and closing out problem issues the first time around.

If you would like to ask Jim and Grant a risk or project management question or request them to address a particular topic, contact legalcoordinator@aia.org.

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