



CLIENTS&RELATIONSHIPS :: LOVE AND MARRIAGE

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Q :: Our consultancy has grown from 4 to 25 people in the last few years. How can we maintain the same level and quality of relationships with our clients that we had when we were small?

A :: The simple answer is that you can't. And nor should you. You can develop something much, much better. You've got more points of contact, more opportunities for client service, more substitutes to call on if you need to change a team in order to save a client. And you're likely to have more powerful corporate communications – newsletters driving traffic to your website, PR, advertising campaigns. Business relationships are, after all, not only person-to-person: they are also company-to-person.

However, you have to work at it. Here are five top tips for client relationship management in a growing business.

1. Employ the best. Check candidates out for their communication and rapport-building skills. You can't afford to carry people who are good designers or project managers, but hopeless with clients.
2. Train your staff properly. If they're not good at client service, you've got the equivalent of a Michelin restaurant with surly waiters or a Ferrari showroom with ignorant salespeople. Much of the training can be done internally, but a regular injection of external training can be hugely beneficial.
3. Support your training with client relationship policies and processes. Timing? Budgets? Quality? Communicate them clearly; make sure everyone understands them; apply them consistently.
4. Ask your staff. Run a couple of facilitated worksessions. You'll get some useful thoughts, and you'll raise awareness of the importance of client relationship management.
5. Finally, ask your clients. What is their experience of working with you? Could it be improved? How does it compare with your competition? How strong is the relationship? In the client surveys we often conduct as part of our consultancy programmes we find that, apart from giving you a wealth of information on everything from your timekeeping and basic project accuracy to your advanced strategic abilities, clients really appreciate the fact that you're asking.

Shan Preddy is a partner at PREDDY&CO, business development consultants and skills trainers to design companies. Her book 'How to Market Design Consultancy Services: Finding, Winning, Keeping and Developing Clients', published by Gower and Design Council, has become an international industry standard. Her new book 'How to Run a Successful Design Business: The New Professional Practice' will be published in 2010.