



Your client – a well planted seed. How to build business with existing clients.

By Anne Scarlett, printed in *Structural Engineer* and the *AE Marketing Letter*

Industry standards indicate that 80% of your revenue should come from existing clients, year after year. The more business you can generate from existing clients, the more strategic (aka, picky) you can be about finding new clients.

If we do a good job for our clients, then they will come to us with more work, right? Right, but with exceptions. Providing quality results and excellent service is the bare minimum that needs to be done in order to build business with existing clients. They expect nothing less. It's the extra effort you give to each client that will ensure future work. Here are seven "extras" to make sure your firm maintains your client relationships for years to come:

INTERNALLY:

1. **Prepare a client-specific action plan** to keep your project team thinking strategically. This straightforward plan should address every angle regarding this particular client: the relevant 'story'; history with your firm; structure/decision makers; details on key buyers, influencers, and informants; preferred project delivery/construction method; your competitors; challenges; needs and opportunities; client-specific information (priorities/criteria; capital spending budget; terminology; standards); differentiators and message. Most important, this plan should detail your action steps towards growing the relationship. **What** special function will your team plan for the client — perhaps a training seminar or some entertainment outing such as a ball game or concert? **Who** will probe the client to learn of potential and planned projects for the new fiscal year? **When** will you take steps to introduce additional services that your firm offers, beyond the scope of your current engagement? **How** might you position your firm to create an ongoing contract with your client where all future projects are negotiated rather than competitively bid? Preparing a client-specific action plan will ensure that all opportunities are uncovered — perhaps even created - and handled.
2. **Create a partnership between operations and marketing to evolve the client relationship:** Every project has an assigned internal key client contact, whether titled account executive, project manager, principal, or even a business developer. Whomever it is, and whatever the title, this key contact 'owns' the client and bears a great deal of responsibility to keep that relationship healthy. Don't do this in a vacuum! Remember, every individual in your company should be working toward a common goal. It is prudent to call upon your counterparts in business development and operations to help brainstorm, plan, and delegate.
3. **Co-opt the entire project team:** Set aside time during a project team meeting to talk about strengthening the relationship — and winning additional business — with the client. Multiple team members will often have some level of client interaction. Even if the project team is organized with a 'single point of contact' (usually the project manager), there are times when certain project phases will require communication between team members and their client-side counterparts. With a raised awareness, project team members on all levels will be mindful of subtle opportunities to strengthen the relationship.

AND THEN EXTERNALLY:

4. **Schedule 'how are we doing?' meetings** at key milestones throughout the project. At a minimum, these in-person meetings should include the primary contact from your firm and from the client side. If possible, hold these meetings off-

site. This is the time for your client to be candid with you, and vice versa, free and clear of project activity. Put your heads together to resolve any issues and continue to strive for better ways to work together. Consider including these meetings on the official project schedule so that your client knows you are serious about continuous, candid feedback. Incidentally, the client should not be charged for these meetings; record it as marketing or non-billable project time.

5. **Thwart your competitors! Respond to your client's subtleties.** Beyond a continuous exchange of feedback, you must think like your client. **Be** your client. Does your client respond to entertainment, team outings, appropriate tokens? To what communication approach is your client most receptive— social or direct; fact-filled or conceptual; big picture or detailed? Take the time to really notice the subtleties that only your firm, as the incumbent, can possibly know. Remember, your competitors are keeping a close eye on your client; they will weasel their way into your client's wallet at any opportunity.
6. **Make post-occupancy evaluations a standard practice.** At an agreed-upon point after completion, conduct a post-occupancy (or post-project) evaluation that is suitable for the project's scope and scale. Throughout the project, the 'how are we doing' meetings will give you clarity on the client's perspective regarding your design, process, communication, and so on. But will your solutions stand the test of time? Your client will appreciate your conscientious interest; some clients may even be willing to pay for this service as part of the project. These evaluations must articulate boundaries in terms of uncovered issues and associated responsibility. But if you do quality work (you do, don't you?) then you will take pride in how well your building, bridge, wastewater system, power station, et al, withstands normal usage over time.
7. **Weave the web of connectivity.** If your client is part of a larger entity — a business unit within an international company or a department within the federal government or a school within a big system — you will want to carefully leverage your existing relationship to break into new related areas. I recommend doing this only after the first couple of projects have been successfully completed. Asking your client to vouch for you, and to connect you with other decision-makers, can be sensitive. A client expects you to seek new business with him directly, hence the validity of executing a client-specific marketing plan. However, he may not appreciate your desire to use him as a referral conduit until after a longer-term relationship has been solidified. Nonetheless, referrals are a powerful tool. Be ready to use them when the time is right.

Each client is a well-planted seed. Don't just admire its beauty and expect it to grow on its own. Give it the nurturing, attention, wisdom, and communication it needs to thrive.