

More than just golf days

Winning new work is more expensive than retaining it, say Donnie MacNicol and Paul Erricker, so developing strong, long-term relationships with customers is key to your success

Introducing an effective account management regime will help focus your efforts when dealing with your business clients. Here are 10 ways to help you retain and develop your most important customer relationships.

1. Recognise the need for change

Account management is a frame of mind – it is about considering and taking action to assist your client outside the confines of delivering the current project. You must be clear what you want to achieve from the relationship, e.g. additional sales, access to new markets or an opportunity to work with leading architects. Communicate with, and ensure buy-in from, your colleagues – account management should inform all of your actions.

2. Select the right customers

Scrutinise your business. What are the key attributes of the customers you want to work with and will their repeat long-term business support your own business goals? For example, they're moving into heavy industrial sites but your business wants to do more light retail work. Be selective.

3. Identify your account managers (AM)

Your client should feel they have a dedicated AM who is focused on their needs. In practice, one person can cover multiple clients as long as each is made to feel valued. Identify the AM's objectives and make the customer aware of what they can expect. Recognise that not everyone wants to be an AM or has the relationship skills.

4. Develop the people skills

Account management is fundamentally about human relationships. Develop questioning and listening skills and competence in building rapport quickly and easily. Identify AM role models from your network whose behaviour can be modelled or who can provide mentoring.

5. Create an account plan

This is your roadmap. It must include an analysis of your customer's organisation, their strategy and business drivers, how well your products and services meet those needs and where you can provide assistance. Account plans should be 'fit for purpose' (e.g. best use of email/telephone/meetings) and should identify what must be done, when, by whom and how, e.g. pricing trends sent monthly via email to the commercial director. Remember that people often change roles and/or requirements so review your plan regularly.

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6. Ask your customers what they want

Approach your customers, tell them about your commitment to a long-term relationship and ask them to contribute to the account plan. Ask what keeps them up at night and how you can help minimise challenges and realise opportunities, for example, provide introductions to people in your network.

7. Become your customer's trusted advisor

Customers have problems that need to be solved and you may have the knowledge, expertise or contacts they require. By committing energy to understanding their problems you can develop mutual trust and become a confidant rather than supplier. Become their first port of call.

8. It's a team approach

Ensure that relationships are developed at all levels with your customer by aligning your team with their staff, then apply point 7. The AM is the ringmaster but don't let them become a bottleneck for communication. For a small company you must be different things to different people, but remember some relationships are more important than others.

9. Seek and act on regular customer feedback

Ensure your account plans benefit from regular face-to-face customer feedback meetings. If you are the AM and also deliver services through projects, ask a colleague to undertake the customer review.

10. Select the right promotional tools

Your account plan should use a range of tools. Customers tend to value seminars, breakfast briefings and research material. Corporate hospitality may be fun, but is it of value to your customer and does it help you win new business?

As with all solid relationships, they take time to develop, so don't expect an overnight miracle from AM. However, by taking a focused approach to building relationships with your customers, you are more likely to benefit from long-term repeat business. Your services and products may be your core deliverables, but customers 'buy' people. Don't you?

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