



Be the Benchmark: How to Become the Buyer's Best Option



By Vickie K. Sullivan, Contributing Editor

Does this situation sound familiar? You were just referred to a decision maker who not only has the budget but is also ready to buy. You are scheduled to talk soon. The problem: a lot of other experts know this deal is going down, and the buyer is being bombarded with options. Every professional services firm the buyer explores has a great track record, raving fans, and intriguing ideas that could help.

What do you say in one conversation to get on their short list?

To be a top consideration, you have to become the benchmark—the option the buyer compares all others to. Here are three steps that will help the buyer discover why you're the one.

Step 1: Set Yourself Apart

Your first step is to set yourself apart by not doing what everyone else does. There are three things you must stop doing immediately because they can backfire.

First, don't expect your referrals to help you get on the short list. Most buyers get referrals from several sources, so don't assume that recommendations automatically give you the inside track. What referrals do now is get you a fair hearing. So, start your conversation from that point.

Second, don't give advice and solve the problem. Yes, that's helpful and you are showing value. Buyers will see you as a generous soul. But two things can happen that you don't want. First, decision makers no longer have urgency to make a choice because you've given them enough information to explore on their own (also known as a wild goose chase). Second, you just set yourself up to be a free resource. Nothing good comes from this. Instead, focus on defining the problem. That discussion will still create value without removing the urgency. (See step two.)

And finally, *please* stop asking general (and silly) questions. Put yourself in the buyer's shoes. How would you like it if every person you interviewed asked, "What keeps you up at night?" You'd hate that question, too, after the fifth time. Instead, ask more specific questions to get at the true cause of the challenge. Those answers will create even more specific questions. Result: your conversation goes where no other expert's has gone before.

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Step 2: Redefine the Problem

The second step is about how to approach the problem. The key here is two-fold: to show the value of your expertise and to leave the buyer with a different perspective that they will now use on everybody else.

My favorite technique is a one-two punch: call the game and then predict the future. First, question what's really going on. Don't assume the issue is what the prospect described. Most of the time, they are telling you symptoms of a much bigger challenge. After a few questions, I'll say something like this: "Based on what you're telling me now, I

think what's really happening here is ..." When you see that flash of recognition on the prospect's face, you've hit a home run.

Here's an example from my own files:

A colleague told me they were looking for an agent because their speaking engagements dried up. They thought the answer was to "get out there more." One look at their website told a different story. Their message was no longer in vogue. Contacting more buyers wasn't going to increase their calendar.

This second part of the one-two punch is my favorite: predicting the future. After the buyer acknowledges the redefined issue, ask them, "Now that we know this is the problem, what do you think will happen if ...?" And insert their plan of action. This question practically answers itself and opens the door for what happens next.

Step 3: Brainstorm New Criteria

This final step will put you on the top of any list. But it will work only after you complete the first two steps (so don't skip anything). Now that the problem has been redefined, brainstorm with the prospect the criteria needed for the solution. Ask the buyer what skills or information would get the best result. This is your chance to showcase how you are different.

Here's what usually happens next: if the buyer commits to the criteria, they will compare everyone else by this new yardstick. The trick is to make the criteria specific. If everyone meets the criteria, then no one gets on the short list.

Let's take our previous example one step further. If my colleague needed to update their message, wouldn't someone who already knew the marketplace be the most helpful? Someone who can do market analysis to determine which message would sell at the highest fee? And if my colleague agreed, would market analysis/intelligence become a litmus test for all the other experts? You bet it would.

Stop Pleading for Work

Many exploratory conversations are really pleas for work. When you go through all your accolades and previous successes, you are simply saying, "Please hire me because I'm good." In crowded markets, that's not going to work. Everyone has success stories, raving fans, and a good background. If they didn't, they wouldn't be out there selling their expertise. Buyers won't spend the time to discover how you're different.

Instead, the conversation you should have is all about defining the real issue and creating criteria for success. When you help the buyer with their benchmarks, you not only help them see what's really going on, but you also show them that you know the pitfalls and what to watch out for. When you contribute to the criteria, you better control the comparison among options. That's how you can come out on top.

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