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2007, Six Excuses for Not Cross-Selling
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(AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM)

By Ford Harding

Ask the management of a professional firm what it would most like to see from its partners, and most will say, "cross-selling." This is among the most talked about and frustrating issues management has to deal with. On the one hand, clients and the firm stand to benefit hugely from cross-selling; on the other hand, resistance from some partners and staff makes it tough to realize.

Here are some of the reasons professionals give for not cross-selling and some suggestions on how to deal with them.

1. My clients aren't interested in the other services we offer.

Of course not! But they are interested in solutions to problems they face and in ways to increase the success of their companies. Your professionals don't need to cross-sell (with the emphasis on sell) so much as identify problems and opportunities the client is concerned about and offer a brief conversation with one of the firm's experts in these areas.

A savvy accountant once told me, "Every client has three or four major issues they are dealing with. These matters are driven by the CEO and Board on down through the organization. Everyone in the organization owns a piece of them. If you are dealing with one of these issues, you are helping. If you are dealing with anything else, you are selling." Your partners should be able to identify each client's major areas of

concern. If not, they need to be taught how to listen to the client and assess the true meaning of what is being said. Most of the time, the issues are identified easily by reading the industry and business press, reviewing the companies' Web site and, if possible, its communications with employees and stock holders. Alternatively, a conversation over a long lunch with a senior person in the company who knows and trusts you will usually get you what you need to know. Once you understand the problems, you can identify ways the firm can help with these issues.

2. I don't know enough about the other services we offer to sell them to a client.

Many partners don't-and in many cases don't have to-know the details of other services. Rather, they are offering a meeting with another partner who can sell the service. Getting the partners to do this requires two steps. First, they need to know their colleagues well enough to describe their expertise to a client. Try pairing up partners for half an hour at monthly meetings and have them talk with each other about their services and about themselves. They will forge a personal bond that is as important as learning about specific services; we all want to know something about the people we refer to our clients. In part, that is determined through a rational process, and in part, it's a gut-check. Partners should be paired up with someone new at each meeting.

The second step is to provide partners with language they can use to introduce a colleague. This would include language like, "This seems quite important to you. Could I make a suggestion? One of my partners, Sonia Metcalf, knows a huge amount about this issue. She has worked with companies like A, B and C to help achieve successful resolution to similar matters. Would it be helpful if I could arrange a meeting for the two of you to talk about how other companies have dealt with the problem? You have been a good client, and I would be happy to arrange it. Of course, she would certainly like to sell you her services, but this would be primarily an information-sharing opportunity. I know

that she takes too long view to marketing, and would want you to feel that the time you spend with her is valuable, whether or not you choose to use her services."

3. If I bring in a colleague and he or she messes up, I might lose the client.

This concern is seldom stated, but underlies many of the other excuses a partner makes to avoid cross-selling. And, yes, it really could happen. But there is another risk, too, that the partner doesn't mention. If another firm chips away at winning more and more of the work the client needs for a broader array of services, you may eventually lose the client. In all industries, the more services a client buys from a firm, the harder it is for the client to sever the relationship. If there ever is a problem on the account, that can buy some time. The risk increases slightly if the client is linked to your firm with two services, but it drops significantly if the firm provides three or more services.

To address this concern, collect some examples of the firm losing clients when a better-entrenched competitor drove your firm out and some examples of hard times with a client, which you were able to overcome because your firm was tied to the client by several services. Cite these examples repeatedly.

4. I don't have time to cross-sell.

Cross-selling usually takes less time than signing a new account does. Usually, a large portion of the selling time is either legitimately billable or is tacked onto an event that is billable. This needs to be talked through with each partner, individually. Better still, advertise early successes in your cross-selling effort and let those who have done well at it tell their colleagues how they resolved the time issue.

5. Pushing other services at a client doesn't feel right to me. It makes me feel mercenary, and I don't want to be perceived that way.

This is a common concern of professionals, whose behavior is so far from being mercenary, and who are so honorable that it is almost laughable. One remedy is to invite a panel of two to four clients to come to a partners' meeting and describe what they feel to be acceptable efforts to introduce them to additional services. Usually, the clients welcome appropriate cross-selling. The main client at a pharmaceutical company gave this message to the partners at one firm who were concerned about pushing too hard: "Your competitors are always bringing me new ideas, and I have often wondered why you guys don't."

6. The client insists that all contacts with their organization come through me. I will introduce other services when it's appropriate.

These words should sound an alarm. Often they are not true; the partner is putting a limitation on contact that the client doesn't desire and has never asked for. It is important to get a clear understanding of what the client wants. Avenues to find that out include a review by a third party hired to interview several accounts to determine client satisfaction. If someone else at the firm has a friend in a senior position in the account, he or she may be able to arrange an informal briefing on the situation. In one recent case where this was done, firm management learned that the partner was about to lose the account due to dissatisfaction with his domineering attitude. The partner was replaced, and revenues from the client increased by 30 percent over the next year.

Like most changes at professional firms, increasing cross-selling is more likely if you begin by focusing on the partners who are receptive to the idea. You are then in a stronger position to persuade the willing, but more cautious, partners. With this success to point to and a little luck, you can then turn around some of the partners who were originally nay-sayers.

The case for cross-selling is compelling. Deal with the obstacles and achieve some early successes, and the case will also be evident.

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