



Are You Settling for Trustworthy When You Could Be a Trusted Advisor?



By Charles H. Green, Contributing Editor

Being trustworthy is a good thing. But that alone won't make you a trusted advisor. To convert a trusted business relationship into a trusted advisor relationship, you must go one step further. You have to go beyond just *being trusted*; you have to reverse roles with your client and learn to *trust them* as well.

Most professionals will agree that trust is a major plus. If a client trusts you, they are predisposed to do many things: take your advice, share more information with you—and buy from you rather than from a less-trusted competitor.

The obvious deduction seems to be that we should strive to be trusted by our clients.

Pushing that simple logic, we can become trusted by: a) getting them more likely to trust (us), and b) making ourselves more worthy of being trusted—i.e. being more trustworthy.

But in that simple sequence, we forget one thing. Deep, rich trust is a two-way street. If we spend all our time being *trustworthy*, and our client spends all their time *trusting*, the game soon runs out of juice. After a period of time, the client wonders if this is really a trust-based relationship—or just a pleasant but lucky coincidence of similar styles.

An example: suppose you find a restaurant that serves you meals *just* the way you like them. The menu, the seasoning, the preparation, the service—all are as if customized precisely for you. Until one day you notice another customer being treated exactly —*precisely*—the way the restaurant treats you.

You suddenly wonder: are they really focused on me? Were they ever? Or have I just lucked into a pretty good product/service match? It's nice that they fit my needs and preferences well, but can I actually *trust* them? The answer is the difference between a satisfied client and a delighted client—and that's a vast difference.

Why Trusting + Trustworthiness = Trusted Advisor

Trust is a reciprocal relationship. It works through the ongoing exchange of favors given without being sure those favors will ever be returned. If the exchange becomes lopsided—most commonly by turning to just money paid for excellent service rendered—then it degrades into "just" a commercial relationship, albeit a valuable and good one.

For a solid commercial relationship to be transformed into a true trusted advisor relationship, the players have to switch sides from time to time. The *trusting* client has to occasionally be *trustworthy*; and the *trustworthy* professional has to take some risks and do some *trusting*.

When a client and a professional begin to alternate roles, they take their relationship into a whole new dimension. The balance of risks taken and favors given can no longer be settled by mere money; it can be cleared only by risks mitigated and favors returned.

How to Build Trust with Clients

You Had Me at Hello: 9 Ways to Quickly Gain Trust during the Sales Process

Using Case Studies to Build Trust and Facilitate Sales

The Art of Listening: Establishing Trust without Saying a Thing

That's how a commercial relationship moves into trusted advisor territory. The good news: the opportunities to make the change appear in some predictable places.

Moving from Trustworthy to Trusted Advisor

The difference between trusting and being trusted is clear the moment we say it. One role requires action—the one doing the trusting. The other role is reactive—the one playing the trustworthy role. The *trusting* role is also the role that requires risk. The trustworthy party succeeds by *lowering* the risk taken by the party doing the *trusting*.

Most client relationships start out with the client in the *trusting* role, and the professional in the trustee, or *trustworthy*, role. If it never evolves beyond that, you can have a good commercial relationship but you won't get a trusted advisor relationship.

There are four natural opportunities for a professional to raise the level of a relationship to trusted advisor status. Those who are alive to the opportunities can take advantage of them, benefitting their clients as well as themselves.

Opportunity 1: The Initial Sale. At the outset of most commercial relationships, the client does the *trusting*. By inviting outsiders in and declaring their willingness to share their internal issues with the outsider—especially an outsider with deeper content expertise in a given area—the client takes a big risk.

A professional can win a job just by appearing less risky than a competitor or by generally lowering the client's feeling of risk. But a savvy professional can actually redefine the relationship into trust terms *during the sales process*. All you have to do is to initiate the reciprocal process of trust—to take a risk.

What might that look like? One or several of the following elements will work.

1. **Sell by doing;** don't sell by telling. Take the risk of engaging in an open conversation, putting your knowledge in play on the client's issues, rather than minimizing downside risk by talking only about your qualifications and past experience.
2. Admit ignorance where applicable. Ironically, the ability to confess you don't know something radically raises your credibility.
3. Make a hypothesis. Not a wild guess, of course—put some work into it first. But dare to possibly be wrong, and acknowledge what you're doing in taking that dare.

Opportunity 2: Early Work Phases. This is the time when most firms will try to build up "early wins," gain respect from the client, and pull down "low-hanging fruit." Those are attempts to build perceived trustworthiness, and of course some of that is necessary.

But the trust-building professional knows this is also time to demonstrate vulnerability, as well as a commitment to principles of collaboration and transparency. A *trusting* professional will seek to identify information sources and corporate change allies, to be candid about capabilities gaps, and to welcome divergent viewpoints.

This is taking a risk. Not done well, it could backfire and leave the professional appearing ignorant, uninformed, or naïve. But that will not stop a trusted advisor, who knows that devotion to client service and a resolute determination to face reality as it is will win out more than a self-serving attempt at reputation management.

Opportunity 3: Later Work Phases. Professionals who seek only to appear trustworthy will color within the lines, seeking to deliver on-budget, on-time, and within spec—or slightly above. But a would-be trusted advisor will push beyond.

This is the time to test big ideas—solutions that hadn't originally been contemplated, implications that hadn't been previously conceived, quiet conversations about possible organizational changes. Such an approach pushes the boundaries of the relationship. It runs the risk of ruffling feathers, challenging politics, and raising old issues.

But a trusted advisor knows this is a formative time for an organization. It has enough data and focus to see an alternate reality, yet does not have fully formed resistance. That's precisely the moment to take a personal risk—trusting that the client will see the intent of the questions and welcome the role of agent the professional is willing to take on.

How can such questions be raised to optimize the risk and return?

1. **Name It and Claim It.** A trusted advisor will use this technique to raise "elephant-in-the-room" issues. It not only mitigates risk, but it helps to transform the topic from a "risk" to a trust-creating upside opportunity.
2. The ability to have these conversations is a natural outcome of having operated all along on the basis of **Trust Principles**: client focus, collaboration, transparency, and a medium- to long-term perspective.

Opportunity 4: Follow-On Sales. A merely trustworthy firm, operating on good commercial principles, will quietly point out opportunities for the client's improvement, focusing particularly on those where the firm can provide solid expertise.

But a firm seeking a trusted advisor relationship will aggressively point out significant opportunities for the client's improvement, sorted by the client's priorities—including opportunities *outside* the professional firm's area of expertise. Such a firm will not hesitate to recommend expertise from firms other than itself. It will even recommend competitors, on occasion, if that is the right thing from the client's perspective.

The risk here is obvious—the client might buy something from someone else, even a competitor, or perhaps nothing at all from the firm. But a trusted advisor also knows that the payoff is ultimately very high for behaving according to two principles:

1. Putting client needs over one's own sales record
2. Putting client's buying process ahead of a desire to close a sale

The payoff may not come in this sale, or the next, or even with this firm, but by focusing on clients' interests for the long term, it will come and will exceed that gained by scratching for each deal.

Are you settling for being merely trustworthy, when you could be taking the risk of trusting your client, and becoming a trusted advisor?

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