

You Can Market to Existing Clients!

By Sally Glick

Q: Our marketing director is always telling us that cross-selling is a powerful way to generate new revenue while also wowing our clients with our depth of experience and resources. However, the challenge is that we don't always know when, or how, to broach the subject with our clients. We believe our marketing professional is right about leaving money on the table, but not all of us are completely comfortable with his advice. Can you provide some guidance?

A: What a great question! You have hit on a challenge that every firm worries about, and one that all too few have successfully resolved. Let's explore this dilemma.

Cross-serving new services to existing clients makes sense

To begin with, many of the obstacles you face when marketing your services to prospects simply do not exist when you are marketing to your own clients. For example:

- They recognize your name, so they open email and other communications you send.
- They respect you.
- You have credibility.
- They trust your judgment.
- You have an insider's perspective of their situation, and you know exactly what they require.
- They are already engaged and are therefore interested in using your firm for additional services they need.
- They are convinced your advice is valuable.

For the reasons listed here, and more, it is clearly much easier to get the attention of existing clients than of business owners who are not familiar with the firm. This comfort and familiarity gives you an opening to

keep them informed of all the ways that you can add value. As their accountant, you are aware of their needs, and as such, you are well situated to proactively suggest ideas, resources, and services to address their current and future situations.

Meet with them to discuss the opportunities and obstacles that are likely to evolve over the next three, five, or even 10 years. During these planning sessions, you can also make recommendations regarding new services that they will need as the company moves through various life cycle stages, undergoes changes, or responds to trends in the industry.

Broaching the topic is tough

You might notice that in this column, I am purposely using the term "cross-serving" to answer your question rather than "cross-selling." This is not just semantics, but rather it is a conscious choice. I use cross-serving *specifically* to remind you that you are truly "serving" your client when you offer additional expertise. Like your marketer, I don't think cross-selling is a topic you should avoid. Actually, you should be driving the dialogue when you realize the client requires more from you.

However, if you think of this initiative as "up-selling," or "cross-selling," I can see why you would be uncomfortable with the process. You appreciate the trust your clients have placed in you, and you don't want to take advantage of that situation. Unfortunately, the only experience many of us have with cross-selling is when we are involved in a transaction and we are encouraged (perhaps even badgered?) to complement our initial purchase by adding on additional items. For example:

- *Buying a new leather jacket?* Perhaps you need the special waterproof polish we sell.
- *Buying a new laptop?* Perhaps you need a carrying bag as well.
- *Ordering fries?* Don't you want the bigger size?

All day long as you shop, before any order is complete, you are most likely going to be asked if you need anything else to enhance the purchase.

This type of experience remains with you, creating a negative impression. Therefore, when you are in the position of informing your clients of further services you can deliver, it is not unusual if you are afraid that you sound the same way! Obviously if you were expected to work your way through a laundry list of services, whether really essential or not, it would give you the feeling of being nothing more than a salesperson who is working on a commission basis. The reality, however, is that you have very little in common with that salesperson. Instead, you have earned the title of trusted advisor—a professional who is constantly reviewing your clients' scenario and making practical, educated, and thoughtful suggestions based on best practices and years of experience.

You are trained to look ahead, anticipate issues, and be available to guide your clients as they make critical business decisions. In some instances, this will require additional services. When this occurs, your clients expect, and deserve, your honesty. This is a well-documented concept. In fact, many consultants talk about making sure that your clients enjoy a “wow” experience with your firm, and one way to impress them is to be a step ahead, foreseeing changes that may occur, and being ready to provide services that address their circumstances.

Which services can be offered?

I think that one of the most glaring reasons that CPAs do not venture into cross-serving is that they are not sure of all the services that are available! (This might sound familiar to you.) Internal communication is essential to effective cross-serving. If you do not know all the possibilities that exist within your firm, how can you be helpful to your client? The fact is that as firms grow and merge with other firms and boutique practices, new services are regularly added to their repertoire. *However, all these new possibilities may not be well communicated to partners and staff.*

One firm I know hosts an annual “Cross-Serving Fair.” Each practice group has its own display booth and, like exhibitors at a trade show, they introduce their services to the rest of the firm. They assume that the other partners are unfamiliar with their skills and expertise, so they have this chance to demonstrate what they do and how the client benefits as a result.

Some services are harder to define and understand than others, and this predicament will continue as firms become more complex. However, this internal education process takes place in a casual and festive setting, with the atmosphere of a Country Fair—complete with food, guessing contests, and even prizes—to make it interesting and gain the cooperation of the partners and staff.

Other firms introduce their nontraditional services for cross-serving at scheduled partner meetings, frequently showcasing a different service at each meeting over the course of the year.

Some firms hold client clinics as a way of distinguishing cross-serving opportunities. What this means is that partners periodically put forth different “A” level clients using a case study format, dissecting their business and personal needs and assessing the current services utilized while at the same time considering what additional services might be useful. The client is not present for this meeting and the discussion is confidential. It is an excellent way to detect if any service gaps exist and to recognize problems before they occur. The partners pinpoint the key issues and then make recommendations to the client based on their collective insights.

Be confident you are adding value

Every firm has its own philosophy and culture, and many share a common hesitation regarding cross-serving their clients. This is due to a combination of factors, including not fully understanding what services they can offer, not identifying which clients need additional services, and not being able to overcome the fear of sounding like a salesperson with a quota to fill. For those partners who have a clear understanding of their clients' needs and how to match those needs to the firms' expertise, cross-serving is a natural extension of their role as trusted advisor. Clients in firms like these enjoy a positive experience, knowing that their CPA is ever watchful, always prepared, and fully able to address their changing needs. Likewise, the firm enjoys a positive experience too—sincerely helping clients and generating revenue at the same time.

Editor's note: If you have a specific or theoretical question about an accounting marketing topic, please email it to Sally.Glick@sobel-cpa.com. If you prefer to have your name withheld, indicate only your first name, position at the firm, and city. ✦