

The Marketing Lifecycle as it Applies to Client Service

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH AND WHAT YOU SELL

At LEVEL Studios, we treat our clients the same way we develop marketing strategies for those same organizations. As a marketer, you are typically engaged with the development of strategy that will drive the acquisition, conversion or retention of a client's customers. When you think about it, this is the same paradigm as an agency's relationship lifecycle with a particular client.

Fostering client relationships begins with the courting phase (acquisition) and continues through the initial engagement to follow-on projects (conversion). A continued focus on excellent service and work will provide the foundation for a long-term client relationship (retention). David Maister speaks to the idea that professional services firms "must execute a full package of practice development steps" to acquire, build and maintain client relationships. Each step is an interconnected link in the chain of the brand promise to your clients. While every member of the agency has a role and desire to deliver their best effort, the Client Services team is the group that has ultimate responsibility for the conversation and connection with the client. Similar to your experience at a restaurant, the waiter is the point person for the meal, and he/she is reliant on the rest of the restaurant team to contribute to the ultimate experience you will have. And the success of that experience will contribute to retaining you as a longstanding customer.

"Are you asking the right questions? Your consumer has to be the center of all you do. All the time."

-Twitter via The Russo Group

Acquisition | This step includes all activities in place to generate opportunities and leads through business development efforts, market outreach (publishing, writing, speaking), concerted marketing programs and materials. Those leads and the initial dialog with any prospective client is the "courting" phase where you begin generating awareness and setting expectations for your team's future performance. Every action is important because the client is not just buying your agency services; they are also entering into a relationship. Your goal as an account person is not necessarily to sell something. Rather, it is your job to ensure the client trusts you enough to enter into a relationship with you AND your agency.

"People want to do business with ones who care about building a customer relationship."

-R. Spector

At the same time, it is your job to be mindful of the kinds of relationships that benefit the agency. Is this a client that you would invest money in? Is it a client that has the potential for a lasting, sustainable relationship? As an agency, we are not interested in "one-night stands." We are mature enough as an agency that a healthy long-term marriage between LEVEL and the client is in our mutual best interest. Thus, we evaluate any new potential client through the filter of culture fit, sustainability and profitability as opposed to just revenue. The types of clients that flourish with LEVEL are those that have the same relationship-based mindset as we do. Once we understand each other, have built trust and see a good fit, it leads naturally to that first engagement.

"Yesterday's performance no longer counts. Today's performance drives future loyalty."

-Dennis Snow

Conversion | As they say, you are only as good as your last project. The idea of conversion for an account team is to take a new client and extend a single project into more follow-on work and a deeper relationship. That extension may be as simple as a new project or as a referral to another group within the client's organization. Your aim is to meet or exceed expectations on existing projects by delivering

outstanding work and providing exemplary service. If the client continues to be impressed with the work product AND finds your team easy to work with, then you have that conversion factor. A key idea for the Account team is not just to deliver to your Statement of Work, but also to ensure that your level of service makes them want more. Again, with the restaurant analogy: You can have a great meal, but if the service is poor, it pollutes the whole experience. Your job is not to sell the client on more work; it is to make them want to stay in the relationship by ensuring that the product and the service are superior.

Retention | The bottom line in any client relationship is whether or not you have delivered as an agency against the client's expectations for your brand. If you have, then you will inspire confidence, trust and loyalty manifested in long-term revenue growth with a given client. The fundamentals of how to retain a client are no different than any other relationship. It takes work, trust and a real sense of caring. A quick read of the chapter titles from "The Art of Client Service" should serve as a good primer for things to consider:

- Live the Client's Brand
- Listening is More Important than Talking
- You Cannot Lead an Account from Your Desk
- Make No Commitment Without Consultation
- Remember to Say "Thank You"

"In the agency biz, service is not servitude, and it's dangerous to confuse the two."

-Twitter Via AIGA

As an agency, we have worked hard to create long-term relationships with our clients and, consequently, LEVEL has retained our top 5 clients an average of about 10 years. Unfortunately, most companies invest a great amount of energy and resources chasing the new business lead, but forget about the care and feeding of their existing clients. The average client attrition rate for most agencies is about 20 percent. In this down economy, if you were wildly successful in a year and brought in 20 percent more business next year than you currently have, your growth rate would still be zero. However, what if you reduced your attrition rate by 75 percent? Then you would have grown about 15 percent under the same scenario, AND at a lower cost. The goal for our Client Services team is to drive quality and service that manifests itself in a high client retention rate.

Conclusion

The lifecycle of a client relationship is ultimately led by the Client Services team. A continued emphasis on service by listening to the client and nurturing the relationship will create a solid foundation for repeat business and, coupled with continued excellence in delivery, will result in great case studies and referrals to help drive the acquisition of new clients and ultimately stronger long-term relationships.

"While great work is what wins business; a great relationship is what keeps it."

-The Art of Client Service

About the Author

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Leveraging senior-level marketing, strategy and account management expertise, Curt maintains solid relationships across all LEVEL clients with the goal of ensuring unequivocal customer satisfaction. Prior to LEVEL, Curt served on the Orb Networks, Inc. executive team where he managed strategic partnerships with brands like Vodafone, Intel and Nokia. Before that, he ran Wirestone's San Diego office and led client teams for Apple, eBay and HP.

