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Meet the MasterMinds: Harry Beckwith and *What Clients Love*

Harry Beckwith is recognized for his marketing expertise and as a speaker and teacher on marketing and customer relationships. Author of the *Business Week* bestseller ***Selling the Invisible*** and ***The Invisible Touch***, Beckwith is the founder and director of Beckwith Partners, a positioning and branding firm whose clients include Microsoft, Merck and Hewlett Packard.

His latest book is ***What Clients Love: A Field Guide to Growing Your Business***. MCNews asked Beckwith for some practical advice on how consultants can give clients what they love.

MCNews: Today's clients and prospects are saturated with information and choices for everything, including consultants and other service providers. Any advice on how a consultant can counter the impact of this trend?

Beckwith: Communicate more succinctly. To do that, edit and reedit everything that you write, aiming to reduce the length fifty percent with the first edit and at least twenty-five percent the second. This will force you to distill your message to its essence and eliminate unneeded words that only confuse your message. Succinct copy also holds more energy and force; it sounds more confident, more assured, and more persuasive.

Succinct copy also is clearer, and exhaustive study has shown that the most persuasive evidence of people's expertise is the clarity with which they communicate. In trials, for example, the jury will give far more weight to the expert who communicates most clearly than to the one with the more impressive vitae. Clarity marks the expert.

Second, communicate more vividly. Red-pencil every cliché; clichés signal to a reader that you are writing without thinking, and that your ideas are not thought-out and original. No one trusts or even hears "our firm's commitment to excellence," not least of all because that cliché raises the question: As opposed to your commitment to what? Competence?

The vivid, succinct, and clear communicators are winning more often. Every firm and individual should do something concrete—take classes, read better writing, or ideally both—to enhance communications skills.

MCNews: Client loyalty has become a rallying cry for many consultants. In today's market, is client loyalty a myth? If not, any tips on how a consultant can enhance client loyalty?

Beckwith: Client loyalty is only a myth for those companies who fail to recognize its power or fail to strive to earn and keep it. Lowry Hill, the wealth management division of Wells Fargo, has intensely devoted clients. So do Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons Hotels, the Mark Hotel in New York, and Campiello's restaurant in Minneapolis. They earn it by connecting powerfully and personally with their clients, and by making them feel important.

How to enhance loyalty? Some ways are very simple and tactical: Return phone calls in near real-time; nothing matters more to a client. Law firm clients, for example, when asked, "What most influences your decision to hire a law firm or continue working with your current one?" rank fees sixth, technical competence fifth, and the speed with which they return phone calls second.

Listen with your entire body.

Remember their children's names, ages, and brief histories.

Make occasional sacrifices; go out of your way to demonstrate their importance to you.

Make sure they are greeted warmly every time they call on the phone or enter your office. If they aren't, find a new receptionist fast. I've seen two receptionists cost their firms \$13 million. Thirteen million.

MCNews: Consultants debate the value of being a specialist vs. a generalist. As you look at the market for consulting services, are clients looking for specialists, generalists or some of both?

Beckwith: General rules are always dangerous, of course, because we live life specifically. With that in mind, however, specialists have an overwhelming advantage. It's only offset for those clients who want the convenience and comfort of one-stop shopping with one firm.

A smaller firm should specialize, because smaller firms are not credible as generalists; instead, they look like people who are spread too thin, or who are trying to be all things to all people. But a Jack-of-all-Trades still is seen as a master of none—and clients want to work with masters.

MCNews: In your opinion, what is the best use of the Internet for a consulting practice?

Beckwith: The best use is as an impressive and very useful, very accessible, and very professional electronic brochure, and secondly, as an alternative means of communicating with the firm or its principals. As an advertising medium, it is effective only if your web site is exceptional and easy to navigate; if it is less than that, your web presence actually will damage a firm long-term.

MCNews: Many consultants struggle to find a balance between marketing their services to existing clients and working to bring in new clients. Do you have any ideas on how to strike the right balance?

Beckwith: The best time to market is when you do not need business; the other best time is when you do. You cannot assume that building a better mousetrap or simply serving clients well will necessarily generate more business—for a variety of reasons, word-of-mouth has declined in volume and effectiveness.

A consultancy needs a brand. Your firm needs to be familiar to its market, and well regarded for something—anything. To do that, you need advertising or public relations or, ideally, both.

Consultants also should find vehicles for demonstrating their mastery, by regularly publishing in credible vehicles that reach their targets. In 1988, I wrote an article on legal marketing in a relatively small regional legal publication that eventually generated over \$1 million in revenue. In 1995, I wrote an article on service marketing for a regional business publication, which became ***Selling the Invisible***, and changed everything for me. Now, just seven years later, you can find references to that article's author as "the world's leading expert on services marketing," and articles in Canadian newspapers referring to: "Harry Beckwith, the leading international branding expert."

As my friend J would say: "Yikes."

The balance may best be expressed in this way: Spend eighty percent of your effort on serving your clients, and serving them better. Spend the other eighty percent reaching out to the market.

There is no better advice than something I read and have never forgotten: "Half efforts do not produce half-results; they produce no results. Work—hard work, continuous work, passionate work—is the only way to produce results that last."

MCNews: What do you think is the most common area in consulting practices that needs improvement?

Beckwith: Consultants must first recognize that they are selling a relationship rather than competence and advice. You must win the person to win the business, and you must keep winning the person to keep the business.

MCNews: What's on your reading list these days?

Beckwith: A favorite question. Here goes: Foremost are *the New Yorker* and *New York Times*; they're always my first priorities. On the bed stand: ***From Dawn To Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life***, by Jacques Barzun—returns me to my college studies in history, with a strong emphasis on intellectual and cultural history.

Dream Birds: The Strange History of the Ostrich in Fashion, Food and Fortune—because I read everything that the experts at Powell's Bookstore in the Portland, Oregon airport recommend.

I did recently finish ***Good to Great***, by Jim Collins, and was very gratified to learn that he, using exhaustive research and a horde of assistants, reached almost identical conclusions to mine in ***What Clients Love***.

On my bed stand you'd also notice the DVD for **the Fleetwood Mac "The Dance" concert**, which regularly finds its way into the DVD, and two CDs, one Bach's **"Brandenburg Concertos"** and the other a compilation disc that I burned, with Springsteen, Marvin Gaye, the Spinners, Young Radicals, Paul Brady, Everything but the Girl and others.

MCNews: Thanks for some great tips.

Find out more about Harry Beckwith, his books and services at www.beckwithpartners.com.