



Getting the Client Out of the Way



By Justin Koury

I have often wondered how consultants can get anything done in the face of what seems to be their biggest challenge – the client. Quite often, as a caterer, I come across clients that want champagne and foie gras on a hot dog and hamburger budget. So what is the answer? How do consultants gain the trust and respect of the client, in order that he/she can get on with the job? In other words, how does the consultant get the client out of their own way?

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To answer the question, I asked several FCSI members (one MAS, one design consultant and one Allied member) to respond to the following four questions:

1. How do you gain the trust of your client?
2. How do you get the client out of their own way?
3. Give me a situation where you had a client who just made the job seem impossible and how did you deal with it.
4. How do you deal with clients who want champagne and caviar on a white zinfandel and hot dog budget?

The replies proved very insightful and helpful. It became clear to me that the beginning of the process for each project is the critical time. The first step is to set specific boundaries. By setting rules and by outlining the objectives of the project carefully, the process becomes simpler. All three offered some basic guidelines.

Gaining trust

How do you gain the trust of clients? “This is not easily answered,” says Karen Malody. “Mostly, it relies on the sense of integrity that a consultant exudes.” In fact, the client has chosen your firm because of your track record – not only for producing the kind of work they seek, but also for doing it with integrity. “I believe that gaining the trust of a client is based largely on how well the consultant demonstrates their ability to add to value,” says Len Bundy. But even your reputation may not be enough. Sometimes, reassurance is needed. “The best way to gain their trust is by listening to them and repeating back what they said,” says Rod Collins. “Then everyone is starting at the same place and client knows you are listening to them.” Here are some tips they offer:

- Make your credentials well known. When the client is comfortable with your background and references, the job is much easier
- Listen to the client. The client will be more receptive to new ideas after they know you have heard theirs and responded
- Be confident in the fact that you add value to the project. If necessary, remind the client why they required/ hired a consultant in the first place; no one can do it all

Forrest Gump had it right. Life (and consulting) is like a box of chocolates; you never know where the nuts are.

Getting the client out of the way

- Get the client involved in the process, but involve them in your own way; give them homework, and tasks to complete that make them feel a sense of accomplishment



- It may be necessary to remind them what they wanted in the first place
- Do not let them micromanage
- The client must state their goals and objectives carefully, and if an issue comes up simply point out that the client is acting against their own goals and not in their best interest

“Sometimes it is best to give the client more “homework” than they can handle. Give them a specific area to really get their hands into and in the process, they are likely too busy to go overboard in another area,” says Len Bundy, FCSI, George E. Bundy & Associates. “Though, most of the time, if the client is micromanaging the design process, they don’t have trust yet. And sometimes...you just can’t!”

Mission impossible

The client whose demands seem to make the job impossible is someone nearly every consultant and even manufacturer has come across. “A client wanted a particular style of dish machine in a room where it was not suited. It would take up too much space, increase labor and production time,” explained Rod Collins, principal

with Rod Collins Associates and an individual Allied member of FCSI. “After pointing this out, the client still stuck to his guns. I told him that if that was what he wanted, I would be more than happy to give him the names and numbers of the competitors that would sell

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it to him. I added that it was hard enough to implement changes when the design is right. I didn't need an order when I knew the design was wrong."

The best answer I can give when you come across that one client who is intent on making the project impossible is to remind them why they hired you – for your expertise. The simple fact is that if a client wants they want and nothing you say or do will change that, then perhaps you are better off moving on. No amount of money is worth having a client unhappy with the finished product when they should have listened to their consultant. You can bet they'll be telling others how unhappy they are, but not that you had warned against it.

The price of tea in China

It's the nature of the profession. Everyone reading this has had that client – you know the one – they want the world but can only afford an atlas. In catering, it is simple. The client gets what the client pays for. In consulting and even in construction terms, this may not always be the case. You can inform the client that you are in fact, a consultant and not a miracle worker, but making it very clear exactly what the costs entail is one way to bring them down to earth with a bump.

"I outline what I can do for a certain amount based on what I have assessed the needs for the client to be after an initial meeting. I then also present my proposals in phases, allowing the client to see what a "total package" of services would be, and the resulting cost," says Karen Malody, FCSI, principal at Culinary Options. "If they can only afford certain phases, that's fine – though I always emphasize that only buying certain aspects is not going to be as effective for them in the long-run. If a client cannot afford a whole package, it becomes an issue of explaining what **can** be offered for the amount they can afford, and being clear that they simply get a "limited package" on the limited budget."

Some simple suggestions include:

- Make sure they understand that you are there to help them enhance their bottom line, but not at the expense of your own
- Make sure each decision comes down to priorities; what does the client need, what does the client want, what can the client actually afford to get
- Make the cost of everything very clear at the beginning, no surprises means no gripes later about escalating costs

It became clear that all three believe in being up front and open with clients – allowing them the respect of reasonable input but maintaining a line when the project risks being compromised. Indeed, operational savvy and expertise can apparently turn the most challenging project into "mission possible".

It is up to the consultant to take each project one day at a time, and realize three things:

- 1: Clients will almost always get in their own way...Be patient
- 2: It is the consultant's job to complete each project ethically, and to the best of their ability. At times, this may involve babysitting the project and the client.
- 3: Forrest Gump had it right. Life (and consulting) is like a box of chocolates; you never know where the nuts are. 🌍

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