

CUSTOMISING THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

As I look up the dictionary for the meaning for the word Professional I find so many of them such as an *occupation as a means of livelihood or for gain* or it may also mean (as a adjective) *engaged in one of the learned professions*; and as I looked further as a Noun to mean **a person who is an expert at his or her work** or **a person who belongs to one of the professions**. In a nutshell profession would mean the vocation that we are pursuing as a means of livelihood and which is required to be executed by an expert.

In today's competitive world it is increasingly becoming difficult to cope up with competition and to stay ahead of others. It is said "I cannot kill competition; I can only distance it and the strength of a person lies in growing bigger than the competition." Through this article, an analysis is being made on how we can be part of the race and still not allow competition to decide the way we are required to do business, and at the same time render professional service in an ethical manner that befits both the profession and the professional. One of the concepts of the blue ocean strategy is about creating markets where there is no competition. As a professional it is possible to create such a space and in doing so, some of the issues that may need consideration are detailed herein.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER (KYC):

Taking a cue from the recent happenings in Mumbai to a leading chain of hotel, what comes to our mind immediately is the breach in the security and that is precisely one of the key factors in our business which is the KYC factor. One may wonder if a service provider, be it a hotel or an individual can do business with an outsider without knowing the background of the customer. The answer is in the negative; we have experienced the impact and the repercussions of doing business with another person without knowing the complete background and not being diligent enough to do a KYC.

In simple terms, this is what we call in a service industry like ours; doing a ***referral check on the customer*** or the least, get to know the person who gave our reference to the prospective customer. We may appreciate that the apex bank has introduced the system of KYC in the banking channels and all of us are aware of the details that are being asked for before opening a simple account. Going by the same levels of reasoning and anticipating the risks ahead it becomes mandatory for all categories of service providers to do a KYC before signing the engagement letter or getting engaged by a customer.

SERVICE LEVELS:

Once we have identified the customer, one of the most important things to take into cognizance is to provide superior customer service to the customer. It includes being responsive to the problems and needs of your customers and quickly responding to their calls or mails and to provide this quality of service one needs to keep the right tools and infrastructure in hand. It is pertinent to note that being an academicians is one and providing practical solutions is another; every professional should ensure that there is flexibility in working with customers and try to adjust their system and schedule to the way the customers want, ensuring that things are on the right side of law.

While rendering the services one should also ensure that the expectations of the customer is met and if possible to exceed the expectations. The professional should be able to anticipate the needs of the client in advance and prepare themselves before any assistance is sought for. This I would term as "expect the unexpected" syndrome while delivering professional service to the customers. In case there is an issue and the professional is not in a position to provide solution to a specific problem, it may be required to source the solution from an outsider and respond positively to the client or in case it is not possible to deliver a solution, then one can refer the problem to another service provider who is trustworthy and competent.

MARKETING YOUR BRAND:

I have always pondered on this issue and have not been able to find a solution to find out whether it is easy to build reputation of the firm. It is the general view that good things do not require marketing, they sell on their own and it is equally applicable to a professional, ***rendering good service is the best form of brand building***. It is noticed that ***word-of-mouth*** is probably the best way to grow your business and it is also the most cost effective means of building a brand. Other forms of brand building may be in the form of speaking or to writing in various forums. In fact it is time tested that many professionals have been effective in creating a unique branding by being identified as a specialist in a particular service by ***writing books or speaking*** at various forums on a particular topic.

It is essential that we try and render new services and assignments to the customers by sending them ***regular updates*** on various happening in the line of activity that we are in, for example, when it was made mandatory that every company should inform the Reserve bank of India on the information pertaining to inflow of remittance many of us converted this as a business and satisfied the client. Periodic updation for the client can also be rendered by sending a monthly mailer which can provide various updates in our line of activity. These are some services that we should be in a position to provide besides the regular scope of work.

One should also try to build a network in the community by participating in social events and functions, getting membership in prominent clubs, getting actively involved in local chambers of commerce or the local chapter of the Institutes. One should portray a positive and helpful image of yourself so that people start considering you as a familiar, reliable and resourceful face. The other important mode to build brand is to ***use the internet*** to exploit its marketing potential - one may consider building their own website. In fact one can ***join e-communities*** to spread awareness; and by participating in these e-groups one can become very popular in the group as a specialist.

ADD VALUE TO YOUR SERVICE:

While a professional should provide the best as regards the scope of work while rendering service, one should also keep a vigil on the new projects or ventures, which the customer plans and always explore areas where the customer can use the professional's services. The professional should take the lead and make presentations on ***value-added services*** that can be provided to customers, for instance, business process restructuring that the company is in the process of finalizing or a post merger activity that the company may need assistance. The customers normally know the nature of the existing services which is being provided but may not be aware of the supplementary services that a professional can render.

More and more organisations are outsourcing various services these days, one can assist in areas like payroll management, human resource management, but care should be taken that in the process of assisting the customer for some additional work there should not be any deviation from the existing areas of expertise. It may so happen that you may sometimes lose the existing business in search of new avenues.

In case the government issues any amendments to any legislations or a new bill is introduced, as a service provider one should be quick to render a ***presentation or a note customized*** to the client on the changes that are likely to take place in the legal and business environment which is likely to affect the interest or benefit the customers.

PERSONAL TOUCH:

As a service provider one should also ensure that a periodical meeting with the customer or in particular the point of the customer is arranged at least on a quarterly basis and one should also ensure that regular visits to the customer's place are made. Care should be taken that the deputy in the firm is not sent at all times and it may not work, since every customer needs to be in touch with the senior in the professional firm. One should always lend a personal touch to the professional services which will pay in the long run.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING:

As a professional one should pursue specialised courses and attend professional development programme on a regular basis to ***be updated and get upgraded*** to provide better service to the customers. It would also be essential at this point to understand that mere professional development in getting upgraded in one's profession may not be enough and one should take up diverse management programmes that will enable us to develop as complete entrepreneurs. Such programmes not only develop one to become good in commercial negotiations but also turn out to be good forum to meet persons from diverse fields and improve the networking.

POSITIONING

Being a follower

Most of us have the tendency to take the path already taken as it is easy to follow the path than create one. In the case of our predecessors who have taken the path of a follower and who have focused and succeeded in a few areas while doing practice and others in this generation who follow them on the same lines of practice which have even thinner margins but felt was a safer route are instances of positioning as a follower. This positioning falls under the category of a simple lifestyle business where one can clearly draw a line both on the prospective business and the corresponding income and has limited growth.

Being a leader

A professional who thinks out of the box, a person who knows that there is risk in the proposed model of business is termed as positioning as being a leader. In fact, in the last recession one had few choices to make, while doing business; but identifying a new area of practice in the nature of, say, due diligence, may not have fetched immediate results, but when the economy started improving and the prospective customer realised the importance of compliance and when there was action in the corporate world in the form of merger, amalgamation and strategic investments, that is when this professional made the most. In short every professional has to be a visionary in being a leader and prepare to build business which may not yield immediate results but it should be the

business of the future. The advantage of being a leader while positioning in business is when things look up, the business community look up to a specialist and not a generalist.

Every professional should learn to position in their field by rendering service of a