The give and take of a client relationship

Want to build a lasting relationship with a new client? Here's what to keep in mind.

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No matter which interpreting school we attended, including the "school of hard knocks," they all lack one type of training: building relationships with our clients. We are taught how to listen, process and speak all at the same time; how to take notes and remember 10-20 minutes of speech; but none of the schools spend much time - if any at all! - on client contacts. We must let our clients know what services we can provide, and ask the correct questions so we may provide the best service possible.

This article will not cover how to find clients or how to network, since there are many articles and books out there on these subjects with which we, as businesspeople and independent consultants, are familiar. It will, however, concentrate on what you should keep in mind when making that first contact in order to build a relationship.

What most interpreters tend to forget is that contacts with clients are invaluable opportunities to communicate, explain our profession, and make the customers realize that they need professional interpreters.

We must come to grips with the fact that we are competing against our client's view of our profession. We know how we do our job, but many of us are just unable to put this into words for our clients. This may give the impression that we are demanding "prima donnas" who, no matter what the conditions, will never really be able to do the job. Our apparent arrogance may leave an impression in the client's mind that can never be lived up to, even by the best interpreters on the market. So, without humility and maturity in our approach, and client education, we are always overselling and underperforming.

Many clients have no idea what interpreting is, and they can be frustrated because we don't live up to their expectations. I am reminded of an interpreter on the public service list in the U.K. being called in to interpret in the middle of the night for the police. It turned out that the police needed an interpreter for a language the interpreter didn't speak. The reply was, "You are an interpreter, so interpret!" This is not isolated to public service interpreting - there have been incidents where conference interpreters have been put in the same position because they didn't take the trouble to explain our profession to their clients.

Some of us have been lucky enough to work with clients who already understand much of what we need - this is due to patient colleagues who had taken the time to explain and educate. Those colleagues should be thanked by us all; they are saints for taking on a job that we don't always want to do ourselves because we don't know how, we don't see the value in it, or we don't want to expend the effort.
But remember, even if we are lucky enough to work with clients who understand our requirements, an educated client is not forever. Many times organisations that seem to appreciate our work suddenly change. Maybe our point of contact has changed, and the new person wants to make a mark on their office; interpretation is often the easiest way of doing that. Sometimes there is nothing you can do other than patiently start from scratch, and hope that by the second conference/meeting the new point of contact has understood why you are asking for certain working conditions.

The first thing we need to remember is that prospective clients are experts in their fields. Even if your point of contact is an administrative assistant, rather than the CEO, s/he knows exactly what his/her own job entails, and what conditions are attached to it, and s/he assumes that s/he knows yours as well.

The CEO and the administrative assistant only see that they may need a service. They are scared, for several very good reasons: in their eyes there is no fixed price based on logical information; they cannot check out your service before hiring you; they don't know why, or even when, your service fails or succeeds; and there is no warranty. If clients don't understand why specific equipment is needed, they find it frivolous. They see that things are outside their control.

Your prospective clients run multi-million-dollar businesses, are in charge of managing people, budgets, production lines, turnover, etc. These are all terms we know how to interpret, but do we know what they really mean in the client's context? And who are we to tell these powerful people what to do? Well, we are specialists in our own field, of course - the field of communication. So, let's Communicate!

Our job is to make our service seem logical to the CEO and the assistant. We have to use signs that are recognisable to them, and to show them we can do what we say we can.

The first thing is to study your points of contact with your clients, in order to make them better, consistent, and more professional. These points of contact include business cards, resumes, brochures and websites, as well as your personal presentation. People believe what they see, and since they can't see the actual service, they believe everything else. This may also play against you, i.e. the longer your business cards, outfit, or behavior shout "beginner," the longer you will be thought of as a beginner.

Your points of contact should tell what you do and why a prospect should do business with you. They should state your claim to expertise, and offer concrete facts. If you can't tell prospective clients why they should hire you in 30 seconds, then you don't know why; and if you don't know why, then why should anyone hire you?

Remember that you are your product; you are your brand. You must make sure that your presentation and service delivery support your message. Most importantly, you must perform with a high level of consistency - in this way, people will know what to expect. A brand is safe. When you travel to an exotic country, aren't you relieved to see they also sell a brand of food or drink you know from home, even if you never buy it there? This is the same feeling of familiarity and relief, of safeness, that you want to create in your clients' minds. Feeling safe is not bad - a client can feel safe hiring you, knowing you will do an excellent job. It simply means that clients know what they are getting.

However, you should not merely talk at your prospective clients in order to show them that you are consistent and a safe choice. You must know what clients want from you. You should do your homework, and know to whom you are speaking, identify with them and their problems. Why exactly is this meeting being held? What are the goals? How can you help the clients reach those goals?
Once you have spoken with them and asked all the appropriate questions, don't immediately say anything about price or working conditions. Just stating your rate and waiting for clients to call back is a perfect recipe for not getting the job. Take down all the information, say it sounds do-able, and you will get back to them within a certain amount of time. Take that time to think about what exactly the client needs, how you can provide it, and how you can present it so that they understand why you are asking for what you want. Then get back to them within the time limit you have set - this is another way of proving you provide a reliable service.

The key to this process is that this is a dialog, it is communication. You cannot be seen to dictate anything, not rates, working conditions, manning strength, not even the presence of booths. You must explain, educate, and show clients why things will go smoothly with you, with your choices, and with your service. Show clients exactly how their lives will be better for choosing you. Because, make no mistake, we are competing to create a market, and your biggest competitors are your prospective clients! Remember that clients have three choices: to hire a professional interpreter (like you); to have someone in-house do the interpreting, though not someone who is a trained professional; or not to have interpreting at all.

At the end of your conversation, no matter what the outcome, never finish without asking one question. "Is there anything else I may help you with?" Even if clients have chosen not to hold the meeting, or not to use your services, there may well be something you can help them with. I know interpreters who have been offered jobs no one was expecting or even thinking about, just because they asked that question.

And most importantly, throughout the entire process, be a problem-solver. Take as much information as you can from the client so that you may give them the best service that you can!

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