



JASPER

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Service is a state of satisfaction

Too many professionals talk of practising their trade rather than serving their clients.

Most professional service firms provide a high level of service, but there are two good reasons this should not be interpreted as a green light for complacency. One, you may be very good but so are your competitors. Two, mounting evidence shows that the difference between satisfied and completely satisfied clients will determine the success of a firm. Completely satisfied clients are more likely to be truly loyal. They will be dependable, recommend the firm to a friend and forgive minor hiccups in service. Not only is repeat business reliant on this kind of client loyalty, a firm's reputation hinges on it too. And only exceptional service can foster completely satisfied clients.

What does exceptional service entail? For many in the professions, unprofitable (that is, non-billable) activities will spring to mind. In recent years, professionals have questioned whether a firm's first priority is to represent the profession or to be a profitable business. Unfortunately, the concept of service has been peripheral to this debate.

In some firms, emphasis is placed on the profession. Training and development dollars are invested in technical skills. Professionals talk of "practising their trade", rather than serving their clients. This attitude has its roots in the unquestioning trust once placed in the professional ("Just do what you've gotta do, doc"). The problem here is that clients will always rebel against professionals who do not understand their business.

In other firms, leaders have accepted the pressure to become profit-making entities. They focus on maximising billable hours, building "products" and cutting overheads. The problem here is that it becomes easy to overlook the importance of building relationships, not just today's numbers.

- Some professionals say clients do not want relationships, that clients:
- Treat professional services like commodities.
 - Push too hard on price.
 - Do not want to be partners — they trade professionals off against other "suppliers".
 - Want results now; they do not want to wait for professionals "to get to know them".
 - Are overly cynical; they put the guards up whenever a firm mentions its other services.

But generally these situations arise when professionals have not earned the right, through a relationship built on superior service, to have a position of influence or equality with the client. Exceptional service is all about

building the client relationship. And for a firm to give that service consistently it must be integrated into the firm's culture. So what's new? Perhaps the more illuminating question is, what hinders the integration of a culture of exceptional service into the everyday operations of professional service firms? On the whole, firms have become too focused on the short term: this year's targets, billable hours, new client acquisition, utility maximisation. These are enforced to such an extent that the average

employee has difficulty seeing beyond them. And that leads to many avoidable cultural tendencies, including:

- Reluctance to spend non-billable hours purely on client service. The emphasis on billable hours means relationships cannot be nurtured; professionals' schedules become so packed they simply cannot be as responsive to clients' needs as exceptional service requires.
- Reluctance to give anything away. Why give expertise to the client when you could make them pay for it and get the kudos with your boss? If the professional is cagey about giving away expertise to a client, of course the client will be cagey about letting the professional know what is going on in his or her business, will question pricing, and treat the professional like a "supplier".
- Lack of emphasis on management training for professionals. A good professional does not necessarily make a good manager, and the incentive to become one is low when it is the client-facing work that is primarily rewarded in firms. Poor leaders mean poor delegation, which leads to missed deadlines and things slipping through the cracks.

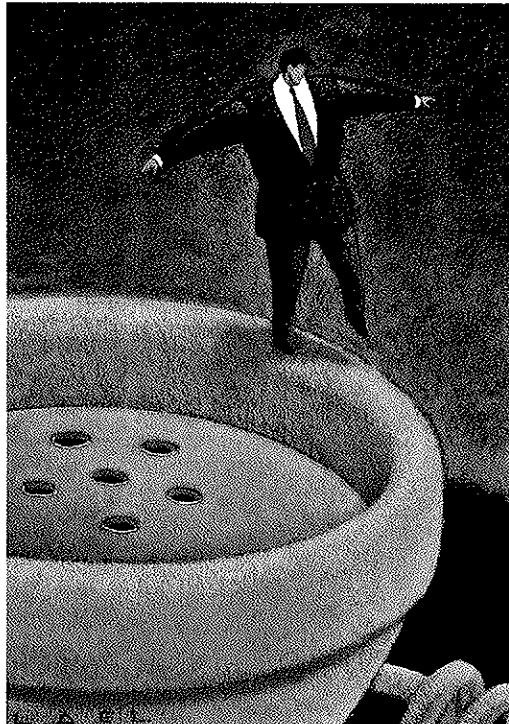


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- Pricing too low. Pressure from clients and internal pressure to close the deal and bring the new client in, can tempt professionals — especially those without training on pricing — to quote so low that teams will be unable to serve effectively at that price. The real problem arises when the firm tries to provide the service within an unrealistic budget. Again, the relationship suffers. It is a warning to clients too: don't push too hard, you end up getting what you pay for.

It takes real courage for firms to invest in providing exceptional service. After all, it may result in a reduction in this year's profit. But it may also start a positive loop. Not only will you derive better value from existing clients (and they from you), but you may also find that your professionals enjoy their work more — and are more inclined to provide that exceptional service. ●

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