



Intelligent client feedback

Robin Dicks explores some key points about how firms – and marketers – can use client intelligence to drive greater financial and strategic benefits.

Client feedback and intelligence can both create a more genuinely marketing led culture within a firm – indeed such a culture is impossible without it. It can also demonstrate the sustained and strategic value of marketing thinking and marketing professionals. But to achieve these goals requires some thought and planning.

While measurement, management information and benchmarking satisfaction in overall terms are important and used by many firms, this article is about generating more value. Let's briefly explore some key ways.

1 Directly generating ROI through effective and appropriate identification of sales and cross-selling opportunities

Perhaps the closest to a 'given' but it's still worth reviewing. Is the programme doing all it could to identify key relevant future issues for the client, their appetite to talk further, and specific opportunities for more work? Firms who just ask about how they perform are missing a trick – in our projects firms tend to see new opportunities across surprisingly high proportions of their client base, which had not been identified before.

2 Improving the results from other marketing activities

This point links to the first one. If you better understand the future issues that are most important and relevant across your client base, you can use this across your activities to gain much better results – precisely because you understand which issues are of most interest and significance.

Let me give an example. Many accountancy firms put on seminars on the topic of 'maximising the value of your business on sale'. But when we ask, we find this is only relevant, in the next 12-24 months, for a small proportion of clients. We find other issues (one example being restructuring) are likely for much higher proportions.

Firms can use these insights to make what they talk about in blogs, social media, on their website much more impactful to more clients, and to inform the events they put on. Doing so creates a likelihood of far higher engagement and potential instruction. It is a simple thing to build, but this opportunity is being missed by most.

This article originally appeared in *professional marketing* magazine. For further details go to www.pforumglobal.com

3 Identifying the capabilities required for future growth

Over the longer term, the feedback noted above can give you a clear indication of the additional technical and other capabilities your firm should invest in – because they are most in demand from your client base and will create a stronger platform for growth.

But this isn't just about technical or professional knowledge. Your programme ought to be telling you – at absolute minimum – what drives the choice of firm between you and competitors, and how well you perform on these factors.

Those capabilities which are important for your future ability to win work and extend relationships, but where your firm's performance is viewed as relatively weak, are precisely the ones you need to invest in to secure your future.

This should impact the skills the firm looks for when you recruit and is a key outcome of research. The firm can better identify what it needs to be distinctive, support its 'brand', and secure growth. Marketers should be looking for opportunities to provide this insight to HR and firm management and to improve the strategic, long-term impact they have on firm performance.

4 Gain much better returns from investments in training

Ask yourself the questions: Do the things our clients care about have a real influence on the training provided to our people? Does our current training investment create a return? Does it impact our ability to extend work with current and prospective clients?

If you are just doing generic technical or client-service training, the honest answers will be "not really" and "not very well". Why not use the feedback about what drives the choice of law firm across your current and prospective clients, and

what you don't perform well, to build a better platform for growth?

Focusing on improving capabilities and performance in this way creates a much better return for the substantial investment you make in training. It also makes it more interesting, relevant and applicable in day to day life.

If you identify the gaps between the positioning you are trying to maintain and that which clients perceive, this should also inform training. Otherwise budgets can be wasted on 'marginal stuff' or where there is a 'checklist' approach to training.

What your people actually do is your real proposition. There is no point investing in marketing activity to 'build a brand' that doesn't actually exist.

5 Pitches and proposals

It's worth asking a similar question here: Are we effectively utilising client insight to improve our pitch and proposal content?

Some of this will be relatively easy to answer. Are you able to more consistently use relevant and fresh testimonial comments from your research? Slightly more difficult – but still very doable – is reviewing whether you can include powerful, robust and quantified evidence about your performance based on client feedback, in proposal documents. How many clients would recommend you and what are your satisfaction scores on key areas? Making these transparent gives potential clients more confidence. Can you use this in tenders?

Finally, think about the qualitative insight you should get from your client feedback programme about what is important to clients, and the vignettes about what they care about. How can you use this?

In some cases you may have feedback from the client you are pitching to, in

others you will have examples from others in the same sector, with a similar culture, or facing similar issues. Can you use this to better identify and articulate the value you can provide, over and above competing firms?

6 What you measure – performance management and KPIs

How does your firm measure performance – overall, by practice or team, and for individuals? This is one of the most strategically important issues that marketers can contribute to.

The measures you use have a big impact on behaviour. Adding measures apart from billings and utilisation, means client feedback can help you to build more sustainable and improved growth. There are a range of possible measures, but examples such as Net Promoter Score, satisfaction, knowledge of key capabilities and services, position against key brand values, and performance on the key things that impact the choice of firm can all be measured, used to influence behaviour, and to enable you to win more work.

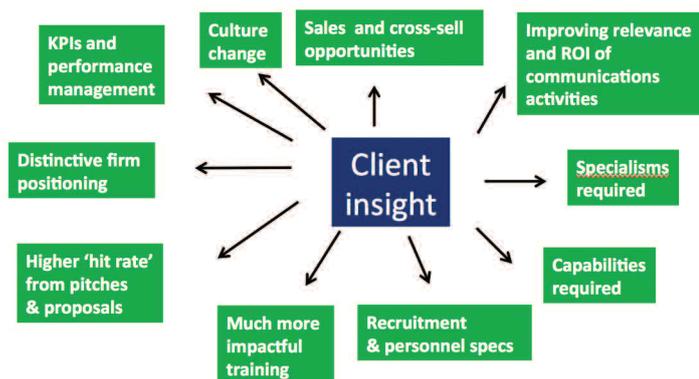
They are also better options than purely looking at effort or time spent; what you want is people doing things that work, efficiently, rather than spending time on things that have little or no impact. This is true of the firm as a whole as well as individual performance management – use client feedback to build a robust and equitable input into the appraisal process. This will help fee earners focus on things which will improve their own client relationships and ability to grow work, and influence the real culture of the firm.

And here's a fundamental point. Many firms talk about how client focused they are. But a firm which does not use client feedback in its measurement of performance, by definition, is not.

By building an effective system to do so, and utilising the insights both to directly generate a high ROI and many other performance and strategic benefits for the firm, marketers are delivering an absolutely core part of the marketing ethos. Thinking this way, outside the 'functional marketing silo' confines, drives the value you can provide now for your firm, and throughout your career.

These issues and others around growth are explored in more detail in *How to Grow your Firm* published by and available from the Law Society bookshop, or at www.thrivingcompany.co.uk.

Some potential applications of client insight:



Robin Dicks is the founder director of the Thriving Company and helps firms more effectively grow, and improve results and ROI from marketing and BD. Contact: robin@thrivingcompany.co.uk