

# Chapter Twenty Five

## *Lessons from the Client-Side*

Recently, I was asked to address a group of colleagues from the American Marketing Association's St. Louis Chapter. I was happy to oblige, since the topic was one I had proposed months earlier. *Lessons from the Client-Side* struck me as a provocative topic for anyone interested in making the transition from an advertising agency or other marketing communications firm to a corporate marketing job. This is a transition I made two years ago and this article is largely drawn from that speech. It was designed to get people thinking about their careers and what they learn from living them.

Client-side is a term I use to hear a lot when I worked in larger advertising agencies. As in "You might prefer a job on the client-side," or "Your background suggests that you might be happier on the client-side." The term suggests that the world is divided into two spheres: those inside the wonderful world of advertising and those poor slobs who couldn't cut it. The notion is remarkably divisive.

The first 15 years of my career consisted of working inside advertising agencies big and small. I used to be guilty, as a proud member of the Madison Avenue fraternity, of thinking the client was a moron, paralyzed by caution and fiscal responsibility and terrified of risk. And as an agency guy, I was always selling a risky proposition. Advertising costs money and it is difficult to measure accurately.

My new view, with 2 years as a client, is that the client is more accountable. He or she has to be. It is different on the other side of the conference room table. The client is living inside an organization and maybe is less likely to see the beauty and power of many concepts and ideas. It's cloudier for the client who will have to pay for the communications gamble in hopes of a return. I also believe that the client, specifically the head of the marketing department, will be most likely to implement the

vision and integrated disciplines and deliver a true integrated marketing communications program.

And now for the lessons from the client-side.

**Lesson #1:** Details can kill you.

Little things are big things and you have to make sure they are covered. I'm proud to have led a number of important initiatives at my company but it always breaks down to the blocking and tackling. A good example of what I mean is this bit of advice: Make sure there is money in the postage account before a direct mail drop. How boring and mundane. An analogy I often refer to is the expert skier who manages to break his leg on the bunny hill. Why? Because he took for granted that he was an expert skier and therefore could not hurt himself on such an unchallenging slope. Hey, not every project is a double-diamond. That does not mean the project is somehow less important in the grand scheme of things.

**Lesson #2:** Time is more valuable than money.

We have all heard that time is money and maybe that's true but the currency of time is getting more and more scarce. And thereby more and more valuable. We all need to be considerate of the time crunch. Listen for the clues to time being stolen away from you. "Can I have just a few moments of your time?" and the sneakier and more insidious "I'll get back to you" and the impossible "ASAP." Face it there is no such thing as a "few minutes of your time," If you are gonna get back to me, how 'bout a specific time? And ASAP doesn't mean anything. Should I do this ASAP item before or after my 10:30 a.m. meeting?

**Lesson #3:** You'll spend most of your time making it happen.

You have to come to grips with that reality. I'm not saying you shouldn't have a well thought out plan. I am saying your job is much more about "Just do it." If you come into a new job, especially if you fill a position that may have been vacant a while, you're going to have to execute even before you get a comfortable handle on the big picture.

**Lesson #4:** Seek out expertise and network..

It will pay off. Schmoozing works, sort of. You will always be more trusting of people you know. Networking allows you to get to know people and what they do. It will always be better to know someone than to blindly call someone out of the Yellow Pages in a panic mode. Best selling business author, Harvey MacKay says “Dig your well before you are thirsty.” I concur.

**Lesson #5:** You gotta listen first.

I had some salesperson call me a few weeks ago offering me a service I couldn't refuse (he thought). “I can cut your customer service costs by 25%” this guy promised me over the phone. Now I've got plenty of problems within my current responsibility. How in the world did this guy come up with this as his lead? I don't even know what he was selling but I can tell you this. That pitch turned me off. The audacity of that presumptive sell really burned me up. Customer service costs are not even in my top 100 concerns and therefore I have no interest in listening further to this pitch. Wrong message That company needs to find a way to listen first.

**Lesson #6:** Seek advice. It's a really good idea.

This isn't the same as networking. But networking is sometimes the gateway to getting the best advice. With businesses relying on fewer people to do more things you need to have an outside board of advisors you trust. My advice is to seek help even on some of the seemingly less perplexing problems. Insight and support is good even if it confirms a direction in which you are already headed is the right one.

**Lesson #7:** Try to look at things differently.

I attended a conference recently where a researcher described in mathematical terms the lifetime value of a customer as  $\Sigma P^*$ . I really found the expression in terms of symbols interesting. By looking at this concept expressed differently, I can embrace it in my approach to marketing without taking up too much space my own hard drive. (I'm pretty sure my own brain holds 64K

memory or less.)

**Lesson #8:** Good ideas can come from anywhere.

In advertising agencies, you tend seek ideas internally. As a client, you have to rely on ideas coming from inside and outside your organization. An example of a simple, yet powerful idea that illustrates my point is a suggestion from a direct mail salesperson. I am responsible for a newsletter to business-to-business decision-makers that mails quarterly. Naturally we hope the publication will generate interest and leads for our design and construction services. Nancy Pfankuch called on me on behalf of her company, Commercial Letter, a large direct mail and fulfillment company. Nancy called on me one afternoon and I showed her a few back issues. She noticed that the publication was mailed in a polybag. She also noticed that we had business reply cards stapled in the middle. Nancy asked a simple question that really sparked. “Why don’t you use the facing card as your business response mechanism too?” Good question, Nancy. We now have the benefit of a better placement of the reply card and our responses have increased dramatically. Clearly that stapled in card was getting lost in the shuffle. A little thing that made a big difference. (An increase of more than 250% response over the previous method.)

**Lesson #9:** Be yourself, instead of trying to be too much like your prospect.

Simple enough right? I may have been guilty of this myself when I was in business development for an advertising agency. I figured the clients were looking for like-minded, maybe even people with similar backgrounds, people who spoke their language. For me, nothing could be further from the truth. I don’t want people to parrot back to me what I just told them. I don’t even want confirmation from others with the same point of reference and likely the same point-of-view. It’s the differences that make challenges possible and innovation more probable. Along those lines, I am almost never impressed by someone showing me a slick cover with my logo on it. Because,

in my job I try to police the integrity and consistency of our brand. The computer techniques available now make it possible for almost anyone to show me a presentation customized for me with all kinds of assumptions and ultimately the wrong PMS Color and up to a dozen violations of my written and unwritten graphic standards. I say don't do it. Present your company and its best features. Present yourself with the same thing in mind. Celebrate differences in people and philosophy. That's how breakthroughs happen. Not by only talking to clones who are trying to be chameleon-like

**Lesson #10:** You can learn something new everyday.

I believe it. I do. It may not always be directly relevant to what you are doing. It may not always be important information, at the time. Something new you learn today may become very handy next week or next year. This year I viewed more than 100 movies. What a great way to get in touch with pop culture. I also visited with hundreds of professionals in businesses from architecture to trade show both manufacturing. Listen and you will learn.

A final thought: Be a Renaissance Person. You may feel a bit like a jack-of-all-trades and master of none but you will also be amazed. A great deal of innovation comes from applying a different thought process to a routine problem or opportunity.

So there you have it, 10 lessons from the client-side. I hope it's helpful in your world of work and in your life.