THE 7 REASONS YOUR PROFESSIONALS DON'T WANT TO DO FEEDBACK

By Sue-Ella Prodonovich

Client feedback is one of the most wonderful business development (BD) tools any professional services firm has at its disposal. Done properly, it can inform your growth strategy, help you hone your BD skills and efforts and, ultimately, lead you towards a more successful practice. And yet, all too often the people who don't want to do client feedback are the very ones you'd think would benefit most from it - the fee earners themselves.

But that really shouldn't surprise you. I see many programs stall with the excuse that their partners are afraid to get feedback. I don't think that's the case.

The reason professionals don't like client feedback isn't only because they don't want their egos shattered or confidence crushed (although there is a bit of that). It's also because of how the information has been used.

I've seen firms cross the line and hand bad client feedback to HR so that professional staff become scared stiff about their bonuses and even their future at the firm. I've seen firms get the wrong information from it, draw the wrong conclusions and then set a strategy that makes them head down the wrong path, leaving their professional staff much worse off. And I've seen firms tie themselves in knots trying to please the unpleasable clients they stupidly asked questions of.

With that in mind, here are the seven reasons your professionals don't want to do client feedback and what you need to do to convince them to get onboard.

1. YOU USE CLIENT FEEDBACK AS A WEAPON

The number one reason your professionals don't want to do client feedback is that they're worried about negative feedback. Or, more accurately, they're worried about what you'll do with any negative feedback. And why wouldn't they be given what I mentioned above?

But here's the thing, negative feedback isn't necessarily an issue at all. (More on that later). And using it to punish professionals based on the opinion of one client is as far removed from the point of implementing a client feedback program as you can get.

To overcome this feedback hesitancy, you need to let people know upfront why you're doing client feedback and how the information you're going to get will be used. Will it land on HR's desk or will it stay with the Partner only – or somewhere in between?

If need be, send a formal email around spelling out exactly how any information will be used and commit yourself to never using it against them.

2. YOU ASK THE WRONG CLIENTS

While we're still on the subject of negative feedback, one thing I'd say is that it's incredibly easy to find, especially if you ask the right clients. To paraphrase Abe Lincoln, you can't please all the clients all the time. And, let's face it, you probably shouldn't be trying to. (See 6 below for more on this.)

Some clients will be unhappy with you because you simply won't be able to give them what they want. They may have unrealistic expectations or be dodgy people who want to do dodgy things. Some clients will be unhappy with you because of the work you do or because they resent the rules of compliance. (Nobody loves an audit, do they?). And some clients will be unhappy just because they're, well, jerks.

So why then, do most firms punish themselves and ask disgruntled or clients what they think of their services? Why do they care? These are the wrong clients to speak to because their testimony is likely to be unreliable and unrepresentative of how most people perceive you. So ignore them. Ask the clients you have a good relationship with first.

3. YOU FOCUS ON WHAT YOU DO WRONG

Flowing on from that, I'd say that, at its best, client feedback should be used to focus on what you're doing right more than what you're doing wrong. Why is it that some clients love your work and want to engage you as much as they can?

These are the clients you want to work with. So finding out how you can get more like them is more important to your BD efforts than finding out why someone you don't want to work with doesn't want to work with you either.

Discovering what people think you do well and then leveraging that by replicating it really is the whole foundation of business development and good client feedback can be the engine room that drives it. And your professionals will gain confidence from knowing what people see as their strengths rather than their weaknesses.

4. YOU ASK THE WRONG PEOPLE

Whenever you ask a client for feedback about how performing you're giving them power over you. They get to say what you're doing well and what you're not and, in doing so, can often feel as though have sway over you for the very first time. In most instance, that probably won't be an issue. But in others will be.

You may be asking someone with an axe to grind, someone who didn't to engage your services in first place or someone who got narky because they had very little to do with the matter you were advising on. You may be asking someone who is a bad cultural fit for the firm - you know, the kind who only like doing business with a particular type of person and the professional you put on their file for one matter wasn't that kind. Worst of all, you may be asking someone who really has no buying authority.

The key isn't just to get the right client, it's to get the right person within that client's organisation. Otherwise, you're wasting your time and that of your professionals.

Read more about how to tell when a client has had enough of you

5. YOU TREAT THEM (AND THEIR CLIENTS) LIKE IDIOTS

For me, this is a big one. I hate nothing more than when smart professionals get treated like they're dumb. And that's exactly what happens in a lot of client feedback I see.

Most successful professionals already get feedback and have been doing so for years. They're tapped into their networks, they have their ear to the ground, they're sensitive to subtle changes in client temperatures, and they have well-timed conversations. This helps maintain power in their relationships (and resists others' ability to control them). So just because they don't engage in a formal program doesn't mean they're not on board with feedback.

The second part is the approach. A lawyer, accountant or consultant's work is highly skilled and nuanced and personal. And yet, most firms ask for client feedback on it like they're asking someone to rate a rental car service.

So when you're putting together your client feedback program use your brain. Don't send out a 50-question survey to as many people as you can (with five reminder emails following). And don't try to book in 50 client feedback calls a week. Quality is better than quantity. Take your time, be flexible with approaches, and ask insightful questions.

In other words, give your professionals meaningful feedback if you want them on your side, not some arbitrary and superficial review system to tick an activity box.

6. YOU WANT TO PLEASE EVERYONE

A lot of people put a lot of store in client satisfaction rather than client feedback. So much so, that getting a good score, rather than gathering quality insights, becomes the end goal.

As Australians, I think we're conditioned to try to please people. (I've noticed this trait in many of the American clients I work with too.) So when someone tells us we're doing something wrong, we go out of our way to try and fix it, just so we can feel good about being liked.

But here's the thing. You don't necessarily need or want a great client satisfaction score. If you do, it often means you're a people pleaser not a professional. You don't want to be perceived as always being nice. You want to be perceived as competent and committed to earn their respect.

Letting your professionals know you don't expect them to please everyone will liberate them too.

7. YOU PROMISE TO ACT ON IT

Finally, I think the biggest mistake firms make with client feedback is when they make over-promises to clients about what they intend to do with the information. Client feedback should be a commitment to listen, not a commitment to act. Firms get themselves and their professionals into all kinds of trouble when they don't make this clear, and find that they have to switch staff or operate differently just to appease one client.

Say for instance, your client doesn't like working with a senior associate but you know that they're the best - or only one you've got. What are you going to do? Compromise the quality of your advice? Look for another employee? Remember what I said right about the start about this not being an HR exercise?

So be upfront with your clients and tell them the purpose and limits of client feedback. You'll get a lot more buy in from your own professionals if you do.

WANT MORE?

If you'd like to know more about how to implement a great client feedback program in your practice get in touch.

And, if you have 45 minutes to spare to discuss your feedback plans register now for a BD-45 session.

FURTHER READING

How To Turn Around Your Net Promoter Score (and Make The Right Clients Happy)

What to Do When you Get Patchy Feedback

Want The Best Feedback? Here are 7 Reasons to Ask The Clients Who Like You First

How not To Annoy Your Clients When you Ask For Feedback

The Cheat's Guide To Starting a Client Listening Program

Dixon M, Freeman K, Toman M (2010) *Stop Trying To Delight Your Clients*, Harvard Business Review

Lafley AG & Martin R L (2017) *Customer Loyalty Is Overrated,* Harvard Business Review

Sorofman J (2016) *Client Journeys Are Discovered not Created* Gartner

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