



HOW TO KEEP YOUR CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS GOING DURING COVID-19

BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH

If I hear another person suggest a 'pivot' or refer to life under COVID-19 as 'the new normal' I think I'm going to come through the screen of our Zoom call and snap their Apple pencil!

Each of us knows how much the coronavirus has changed business in professional services. Workflows have been disrupted and in many cases have dried up, salaries have been cut and partner drawings slashed, and we're all working from home trying to juggle domestic life, social isolation and often kids' schooling too.

None of this is normal. None of it will stay this way forever. Everything changes all the time. The business environment we were operating in pre-COVID-19 where times were relatively good was different from the one we operated in a few years before that.

Who remembers just five or 10 years ago when the professional services firms went through probably their most severe period of rationalisation and pain on record?

Still, in this very un-normal business environment, one thing many of us are struggling to come to grips with is how to keep up the relationship with our clients. With that in mind, here's my view on what you should be doing.

1. TREAT EVERYONE DIFFERENTLY

COVID-19 hasn't treated all clients the same way. You shouldn't be either.

Some have been devastated, some have taken a small hit and for others, it's almost business as usual, at least when it comes to cashflow and profitability.

That means this isn't time for a one-size-fits-all approach to contacting people. Categorise your clients according to their business sentiment or outlook and tailor your responses to who you're speaking to.

2. DO THINGS SYSTEMATICALLY BUT DON'T SCRIPT THEM

Before you start picking up the phone work out where the most appropriate place is to make your first call or to send that first email. Is it to the struggling client to offer support and let them know you're there? The client who's charging along despite the uncertainty to let them know that, well, you're there for them too?



Any communications you have with clients should be genuine. I've mentioned that I [think elevator pitches need to be thrown down the lift shaft](#). Well, the same goes for any kind of scripted conversation. If you get onto the phone and start reading lines, people will notice and it really won't impress them.

Sure, it's a good idea to go into any conversation with some issues you want to raise but it's more important that you listen to what your client is telling you and respond appropriately.

3. DIG A LITTLE DEEPER

When you're listening, be prepared to read between the lines. See past what people have been telling you superficially and try to get an understanding of what's really at play.

On the face of it, people may say they're fine when really they're deeply worried.

You've probably worked out that many people are conditioned to say they're busy whenever asked, even when there are tumbleweeds blowing through their home offices. Also, don't confuse a pleasant or jolly demeanour for a genuinely positive outlook.

There's a [difference between optimism and cheerfulness](#).

4. DON'T SELL

The worst possible thing you can do right now is to start plugging your services or the services of others in your firm. [I don't like cross-selling at the best of times](#) - cross-selling though can be a welcome relief.

Your clients know what they do and they know you're available. If they don't, the act of getting in touch with them is enough to tell them that.

Overtly plugging your services at a time like this is, well, a little distasteful.

5. KEEP UP THE SOFT COMMUNICATION

The best reason to contact someone is to them with something useful. If you've been meaning to write that article or prepare that (online) seminar, well now's the time to do it.

A well-timed thoughtful piece covering a topic that genuinely concerns your clients can be gold at a time like this - opening more doors than if you'd gone in hard. You could also leave a short email-based note just checking in to make sure your clients are coping working from home in isolation. Two lines are often enough to let people know you care.



IN SHORT...

You should be touching base with your clients now but you should be doing so in a helpful and non-obtrusive way. Now is the time to bring your network to work for the benefit of others. And that means being thoughtful and authentic, not salesy and slick.

WANT MORE?

If you'd like to know more about keeping up client relationships [get in touch](#).

FURTHER READING AND VIEWING:

1. Our last article - [The Rules For Business Development During COVID-19](#)
2. Stanford University's [Design Thinking Bootleg](#) provides a set of tools and methods to help with client and team relationships, building empathy, and problem-solving.
3. Building Resilience: [Reducing Stress and Bouncing Forward From Crisis, Challenge or Change](#). An interview with Renee Branson (37 min video).

Sue-Ella is the Principal of [Prodonovich Advisory](#), a business dedicated to helping professional services firms sharpen their business development practices, and attract and retain good clients.

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