



WANT THE BEST FEEDBACK? 7 REASONS TO ASK THE CLIENTS WHO LIKE YOU FIRST

By Sue-Ella Prodonovich

When it comes to getting realistic feedback, a lot of professionals live under the misapprehension that the best results come from asking problem clients first - someone who's ambivalent or even hostile about their services. After all, they reason, getting feedback from someone who likes me will just lead them to sugar-coat the answers and tell me I'm doing great. What could we possibly learn from that? What I really need to know is where I can do better.

Well, I disagree. Asking your best clients for feedback can be one of the most powerful weapons you have - and for that reason it's something you should be doing regularly. In fact, if you're doing a round of client feedback, you should always go to your best clients before you open it up to the floor. Here's why.

1. YOU'LL GET GOOD INTELLIGENCE

We all know friends will tell you things enemies never would. In your case, clients who trust you might be happy to share things such as the state of the professional services market, what your rivals are doing, and where their perceived strengths are compared to yours. They could also tell you things about their business and their pain points that others keep their guard up about.

At the same time, if you do press a good client on where you've slipped up or failed to meet expectations and they're prepared to tell you, it will usually come without ramifications. If you tried doing the same to someone who didn't like you it could damage the relationship - or even cost it altogether.

2. IT CREATES A POSITIVE BIAS

Asking a client to share information can be something that brings you closer together, especially when they know you're doing it from a position of strength. It shows them that they're not being taken for granted and that you're not ruling them out just because they're loyal. But it's more than that too. By asking clients with a positive perception about your service, you're kicking off your feedback with what went right, not just what went wrong. That can be a very powerful thing, both for you and for the client you're asking.

Start any conversation with the chance for them to talk about your good work. Ask them to compliment you and congratulate you on where you've excelled. Because, done right, studies have also shown that this creates a positive bias towards you that encourages spending. In fact, there was a great article on this very thing in the [Harvard Business Review](#) recently, albeit in the context of surveys.

"Beginning a survey with what the researchers call 'open-ended positive solicitations; seems to be an easy, low-cost way to increase satisfaction and spending," the authors noted.

They also pointed to one study where customers who were asked for a compliment at the beginning of a satisfaction survey completed 9% more transactions and spent 8% more over the next 12 months.

In another, a B2B software firm found that users of trial software asked at the start of a survey to describe the features they particularly liked spent 32% more on the firm's products over the following year than trial users who weren't asked to do so.

It's powerful stuff and I've seen it work many times in professional services too.

3. IT LETS YOU GET INTO MORE COMPLEX CONVERSATIONS

The worst client feedback responses are the 'yes/no' kind. If you're really trying to get to the nub of how you're going and what you can do to improve, you need more than that. And the very best information comes with detail.

To this end, when you interview your best clients, they're far more likely to give you the war stories and in-depth explanations that put some 'meat on the bone'.

Better still - and with their permission, of course - you should be able to then use these stories to engage other clients. Instead of just asking "How do you find X...", you can now say: "How do you find X, because one client said y..."

It may sound like nothing, but having that kind of context can make a big difference to the quality of information you get and your overall rate of response. It can also help condition your more difficult clients into seeing you positively.

4. YOU CAN BETA TEST QUESTIONS

If you're running exactly the same questions at the end of a block of client feedback that you're running at the start, I can only assume one of two things. Either you're either some kind of genius who knew exactly how things would pan out before you started, or you're not doing it very well.

The thing is, it's often only once you start asking a few questions that you find out: a) the right way into the information you want; and b) what clients' real concerns are. You should always be adjusting, refining and adding to your questions based on what crops up.

When you begin by asking the clients you get along with best, you give yourself the opportunity to do this without putting too much on the line. You can iron things out and give yourself some much needed confidence and momentum before you get to the clients you know won't be as accommodating.

5. YOU CAN GET YOUR NINJA ON

Once you have the momentum that the words of good clients give, you'll see where you're flying and don't need to change. You'll also see where you're failing and need to bring out the big guns. By that, I mean you'll get a sense for when it's fine to go in with your regulars and when you need to tap up that polished senior partner who can go in and smooth over even the most outrageously bad scenario. You'll also get a good sense of where the areas are that you can tap into more work and build your practice.

And that's one of the main points of client feedback, isn't it?

6. YOU CAN GIVE YOUR OWN FEEDBACK

The best feedback is usually a two-way thing, where clients tell you what they really think and you get to tell them back. When someone likes you, you can get away with saying stuff that you might be afraid to with other clients. And, trust me, this can be something they appreciate it.

Take, for instance, the Corporate Counsel I was talking to recently who knew she had a serious problem with the way some of their staff were working and briefing out matters. She and the other managers wanted proof of what was happening so they asked their panel of law firms for feedback and, guess what? No one was prepared to say a thing. And, because the lawyers wouldn't speak up, everyone suffered.

When you're in a relationship of trust, and free to speak your mind without repercussions, you'll avoid situations like this one.

7. YOU CAN CRACK OPEN PANELS

Speaking of which, a lot of professionals I know become a little afraid to ask for feedback from a good client when they're part of a panel. Why? The worst they can do is say no. But they're more likely to agree to talk, even if it's off the record. And when they do, they'll often give you a valuable insight on where you sit compared to your competitors.

For instance, they may tell you your fees are cheaper than the others, in which case it could be time to put your prices up. Nice.

They may tell you when they go to you and when they go to your rivals, and even give you the opportunity to change their perceptions about that.

Anyway, you need to remember that in a few years' time your place on the panel will probably be up for review anyway. If you speak to them now and act on their advice, you give yourself every chance to be what they're looking for. And you give them every reason to keep you on.

AND FINALLY...

Client feedback can be a confronting experience. If you engineer it wrongly so that you just get beaten up, it can also be a demoralising one. But by putting your best clients first and not last, you give yourself the best opportunity of making it a positive experience: one that gives everyone in your firm a morale boost and lifts your bottom line.

WANT MORE?

If you'd like help with building the skills and smarts of your team email Sue-Ella or [make a time for Sue-Ella to call you.](#)



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