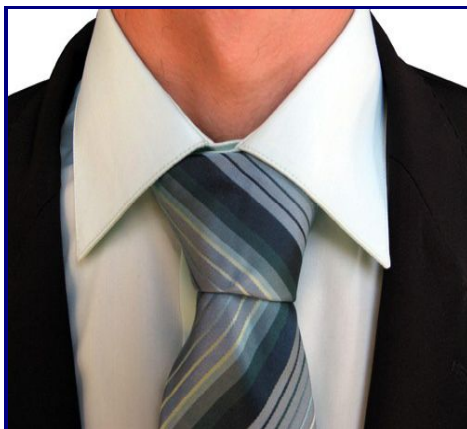


12 Secrets Of Effective Business Communication

Pitching Potential Clients

When you freelance or own a business, your livelihood depends on your ability to sell your services. You need to be able to convince prospects that you are the best person for the job, and the communication secrets in this article will help you do this successfully.



1. Ask the Right Questions

Part of selling your services is being able to understand the client's unique needs. You can do this only by asking questions that get to the heart of the challenges they are facing. Once you have a clear understanding of the problem that the client needs to solve, you can pitch your services as the best possible option for the client, outlining how you will meet their needs.

For example, when I am contacted by a prospective client, I have them fill out a website requirements document that poses various questions to help me better understand what they are looking for in a website. Some of the questions I ask are:

- Describe the nature of your business.
- Who is your target audience?
- What is the background on the project? (Is it brand new? Has it already begun?)
- What are the goals and objectives of the project?
- What is the timeline for the project?

2. Communicate Professionally

Your professionalism can win you contracts, and your communication skills add to the complete package. Take time to proofread all emails prior to sending; use a business email address with a proper signature; answer the phone professionally; and speak articulately and competently at all times.

While my email signature has evolved over time, below is the general format I follow, which has worked well for me:

-
Name
Company | Website
Email | Phone number

Client Meetings

Client meetings, even those that take place over the telephone, are an integral part of every successful business. Follow these tips to make your meetings as productive as possible.



3. Schedule and Prepare Thoroughly

We're all busy these days, so scheduling your meetings in advance ensures that you and your clients have an adequate amount of uninterrupted time to speak. Once your meeting is scheduled, take time to prepare an agenda that outlines focus points and sets a structure. Sharing the agenda for the meeting gives both you and the client an opportunity to fully prepare.

Because you may not be using the same calendar or scheduling program as your client, confirming the date and time of your meetings in an email and sending a reminder and the agenda the day before is good practice. If you are unsure how to format an agenda, plenty of templates are available for free online.

4. Speak, Pause, Listen

When you have several topics to tackle, rushing through them to get all of your ideas out may be tempting. But this causes confusion and makes the client feel that their input is not important. Slow down, and remember that communication is a two-way street. Establish a give-and-take that allows both parties to have their say.

One way to become a better listener is to limit or eliminate distractions during your conversations. That may mean closing your email client, turning off the television and closing the door to your office. By doing these small things, you ensure that the client has your full attention, and they will sense that, too.

5. Follow Up in Writing

While you may be taking notes during phone or in-person meetings, the other party might not be, so follow up after the meeting with a written message, giving an overview of the discussion to make sure you are both on the same page. Summarize what was agreed, repeat questions that were raised and outline the next steps and responsibilities for both parties.

In addition to sending your notes, invite the other party to give their feedback on what you have sent. This way, it becomes a collaborative document and not just one person's view.

Customer Service

Your clients want to feel that they are your priority. You can make them feel so by providing exemplary customer service. Try these communication-focused actions to improve your customer service.



6. Ask for Feedback

One way to maintain long-term relationships with your clients is by keeping open lines of communication. This means asking them for their input on how things are going and how they feel about the service you're providing. This can be accomplished by inquiring at the end of a project, during day-to-day conversations or through formal surveys. The format matters less than the actual act of it, so work it into your business and fine tune as you go along.

When conducting surveys, use an online service that tracks responses for you. There are several online services that should give you enough functionality to conduct client surveys. Here are a few worth checking out:

- [PollDaddy](#)
- [SurveyMonkey](#)
- [Zoomerang](#)

7. Address Problems

If a client is unhappy, don't ignore their complaints. Ask them why they are unhappy and what you can do to fix the situation. The longer you wait to bring it up, the worse it will get. Addressing the issue and being accountable when appropriate puts you on the path to resolution. And your willingness to face the problem head-on tells the client that you care about the project and their satisfaction.

If a client complains about your turnaround time or responsiveness, you may need to create a more formal project plan to clarify expectations. A working document like this can also eliminate some of the uncertainty regarding responsibilities and keep everyone on track.

8. Try a New Format

If a problem with your client stems from miscommunication, try a different method of communication. If you have been handling everything via email, schedule a phone call to see if that clears things up. After the call, you can summarize the conversation in an email to the client, which will give you another opportunity to get both of you on the same page again.

Today, so much communication is done via email that the opportunity for major miscommunication is almost inevitable. A rule of thumb is to limit your email to one screen-full (i.e. above the fold); anything that requires more space than that should be handled by phone. This should help you avoid some of the pitfalls of relying on email alone.

Face-to-Face Networking

Networking events, conferences and other face-to-face opportunities can take your business to a new level. These tips focus on helping you get the most from in-person networking activities.



9. Communicate Confidently

Be confident and use body language to support that confidence. Shake hands firmly, smile and make eye contact while communicating at live networking events. Don't forget to bring business cards to hand out to everyone you meet, and remember to relax and be yourself.

Before heading out to a networking event, practice introducing yourself to new people to gain confidence. Working on your introduction with someone you trust and asking for their feedback also helps.

10. Prepare an Elevator Speech

An elevator speech helps you make the most of a first impression, while making networking situations easier and more productive. Be prepared with your speech and ready to answer common questions about your business and what you do. Practice your elevator speech ahead of time so that you are relaxed and comfortable with introducing yourself.

Your elevator speech should last no longer than 30 seconds and should convey how your product or service solves a problem for your target audience. An elevator speech could go something like:

Have you ever gotten completely lost on a website because the navigation was inconsistent, confusing and disorganized? What I do is redesign websites for small-business owners who need a stronger, more coherent online presence. By learning as much as I can about the company, I create a strategic plan for reinventing an existing website to be more functional and user-friendly.

Marketing Your Services

Whether you market your business online, in person or through traditional advertising, communication is key to brand awareness. Here are two secrets to magnify the impact of your marketing across the board.



11. Be Responsive

A big part of marketing is being available to your target audience and following up when necessary. If you market your business through social media outlets—including Twitter, Facebook and blogging—watch for and respond to comments, questions and especially complaints. And when you are contacted as a result of offline marketing activities, respond quickly and professionally.

Plenty of recent examples on Twitter show how certain brands have been slow to respond to criticism, hoping it would die down, only to see it spin out of control. Also, when you do respond on social media websites, keep it professional, and avoid confrontation because that would only spread the fire.

12. Write Well

You can't successfully promote your business if your marketing copy is not clear, concise and action-provoking. If writing is not your forte, consider hiring someone to help you craft copy that attracts potential clients, generates interest in your services and motivates potential clients to action.

To strengthen your writing skills, start a swipe file of marketing copy that you like and have found inspirational. Read through it and make notes of what you like in particular and what pulls you in. By making this a frequent exercise, you should be able to learn what makes good copy good and bad copy bad.

Your Turn to Weigh In

Being a tolerable communicator and an effective communicator is the difference between being good and great at what you do. If your design skills are up to par with your competition's, then strong communication skills can put you ahead. Strengthening your communication skills is worth the time and effort, and you may be surprised by how much you benefit from more polished and professional interaction.

What do you think? What impact has communication had on your success? How have you improved your ability to communicate with clients and colleagues?