

Rising to the cross-selling challenge

With few new clients on the horizon, many firms believe it is vital to win more business from existing portfolios, says John Timperley



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The last two years have forced many professional services firms to look at their existing client base as the main source of revenue. But fee-earners often find it difficult to convert new work opportunities in their client base. At the same time they worry about appearing 'salesy' or pushing for business. They feel they could jeopardise a good client relationship they've worked hard to build.

Cross-selling should certainly not aim to push clients into anything and, as marketers and BD professionals, we need to spread the word. Instead cross-selling should focus on

generating more value and giving further help to clients to enable them achieve whatever it is they want. With the focus on the client's needs and not our own, it's hard to be salesy.

Think strategically

But how can you help fee-earners in this area? The first thing is to sit down and think more strategically about specific client relationships. A quick 15 minutes brainstorm will start to identify avenues of help which can then be explored further with the client. Use the following questions to help structure the brainstorm:

1. What are the client's current internal challenges at present?
2. What external factors are having a positive/negative effect on their business?
3. What legislation is coming up that will affect this contact/client?
4. Who are the firm's specialists in these areas?

Expanding your client contacts

Sometimes a fee-earner has a relationship with a small number of contacts in the client organisation. Often though there are other influencers or decision-makers who could benefit from your firm's expertise. So as well as thinking about potential issues the client organisation is facing, it's also wise to consider specific individuals. The more relationships a firm has with key personnel in the client, the more opportunities there are to offer help. It also means that when one contact moves on to another job, the client relationship isn't suddenly at risk. So consider who else in the client organisation fee-earners could forge a relationship with. Who in the client could make an introduction for them?

Introducing colleagues

Professionals often confess they don't know how best to introduce colleagues into client relationships. A good way is to use the post-deal/matter/assignment review to introduce new people to client contacts. Invariably a project or deal highlights additional or different challenges and, if the fee-earner can 'talk up' their colleagues, this can be a great time to position them effectively with a client contact. Successful phrases and questions to use here include:

- "Would it be helpful if I brought along a colleague who specialises in ... I think you'll find their input valuable because ..."
- "Would it be useful if I introduced ..."
- "I think it might be valuable if my [specialist] colleague gave you a call on that ..."
- "Just on that point, perhaps we could consider how our [practice area] could help you to ..."
- "Is that something you would like me to pick up with our technical specialists in that area ..."

To gain the client contact's confidence to accept the introduction of others, one strategy that can work in the right circumstances is to offer a free or low cost 'taster' of a colleague's service to show how they work and deliver value for clients.

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Other opportunities to introduce colleagues

Firms can also create a 'safe environment' for cross-selling by organising an informal lunch, a wider dinner, a team get together or 'brainstorming'. The trick here is to discuss matters of interest to the client and not be too up front about introducing other service areas.

Where appropriate, fee-earners can 'ride shotgun' with other colleagues - going to client meetings in twos to find out more about their business. We have seen some fee-earners become cross-selling 'buddies'. They build strong working relationships with those they know and trust to deliver for their clients and contacts. Often these fee-earners have complementary areas of expertise (such as an industry specialist audit professional and tax adviser).

To do this effectively fee-earners need to know what other people do in the firm. They need to keep up to speed with what the wider firm offers, otherwise they invariably miss the opportunities that present themselves (or don't know who to refer them to even if they do spot them).

Cross-selling has worked really well when fee-earners have got their heads together and brainstormed how they could help each other's clients and share contacts. The brainstorming sessions have often led to packaging different expertise or support to solve a specific range of client issues.

Getting the client interested

To be successful in cross-selling a colleague's expertise to a client, it really pays to be interested and probe the client about the wider areas of their business, not just those relating to the fee-earner's own specialism. In pitching in another's expertise it helps if the professional can match the personalities of those they introduce to their client contact. Chemistry can be vital in successful cross-selling. You can always ask a client contact who they think you should introduce to their colleagues and why. It's then important to link the introduction to their business issues. And when a cross-sell has been successful, consider who else in the fee-earner's client base may have the same issue.

Receiving cross-selling referrals

Of course cross-selling works both ways and a fee-earner is likely to receive referrals from colleagues in return to those he or she introduces. Here are some tips here to help stimulate internal referrals and not let colleagues down.

1. Follow up quickly and effectively - a colleagues' relationship depends on your actions.
2. Keep them in the picture - keep your colleague informed of progress. Tell them what you are going to do, when, the outcome and the next steps.
3. Repay the favour - if you've received a cross-sell opportunity why not think about the referrer and how you can help them.
4. Celebrate it ... and publicise your cross-selling success

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