

Excerpts from “*The Trusted Advisor*”

By David H. Maister

Earning Trust

To SEE HOW THE SUCCESS of your professional career depends on trust; **consider your own purchases** of professional services. Whether you are hiring someone to look after your legal affairs, your taxes, your child, or your car, the act of retaining a professional requires you to put your affairs in someone else’s hands. **You are forced into an act of faith, and you can only hope that they will deal with you appropriately.**

You can research their background, check their technical skills, and attempt to examine their past performance. In spite of all this, when the final decision on whom to hire comes, you must ultimately decide to trust someone with your baby, which is never a comfortable thing to do.

When retaining a professional, what you (and your clients) want is someone who understands your interests and will not put their interests ahead of yours while working for you. **You want someone you can trust to do the right thing.** You want someone who will care. Getting hired (and getting rehired) is about **earning and deserving that trust.**

How to Win Trust

If trust is so important, how does one go about winning it? How do you get somebody to trust you? It is clear that it is not done by saying “Trust me!” Nothing is more likely to get the listener to put up his or her defenses!

The key point is that trust must be *earned* and *deserved*. You must do something to give the other people the evidence on which they can base their decision on whether to trust you. You must be willing to *give* in order to *get*. **For example, David (Maister) once had to hire a lawyer to probate a relative’s will. The first few lawyers he spoke with tried to win his business by telling him when their firm was founded, how many offices they had, and how much they would charge. None of this inspired much confidence.** In fact, the more they talked about themselves and their firms, the less interested they appeared to be in David and his problems.

Finally, he encountered a lawyer who, in the initial phone call, asked how much David knew about probating a will. David’s reply was “Nothing!” The lawyer then offered to fax to David a comprehensive outline of the steps involved, what he needed to do immediately, and what he should forget about for a while because it was not urgent. The fax also provided the phone numbers of all the governmental bodies David needed to notify, even though this had nothing to do with the legal work (or the lawyer’s fees).

All of this (immensely helpful) information was provided freely (and for free) before the lawyer had been retained. Naturally, he got the business. He had built confidence by demonstrating that he knew what information was most relevant to David, even though some of it had nothing to do with the practice of estate law. He had earned trust by being generous with his knowledge and proving that he was willing to earn the potential client’s business.

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The Client’s Perspective

To understand some of the emotions surrounding the client’s use of professionals, think of the personal risks (reputation, promotion opportunities, bonuses, perhaps even one’s career) that go along with the responsibility for choosing (and working with) any outside provider for a risky or expensive corporate matter. How would you like to be known as the person to blame if the corporate head-quarters designed by the architect (that *you* chose) didn’t work out? If the major lawsuit was lost? If the new marketing campaign failed to deliver the goods?

Viewed in this light, **the client has every right to enter the process of using an outsider in a high state of anxiety.** What’s worse, the client’s inevitable caution and trepidation are reinforced by the fact that outside professionals often see complications in a project the client doesn’t see. **In fact, it is an essential part of the professional’s craft to reveal nuances, problems, barriers, and issues of which the client is unaware.** If these are not conveyed with tact and skill, the client could easily believe (however unfairly) that, rather than relieving fears and being helpful, the professional is creating complications.

There are other emotional issues usually present as well. In the normal course of their business lives, client executives are people of accomplishment, authority, and respect within their organization. When hiring an advisor, they are forced to place their affairs for an uncertain period of time (and cost) into the hands of a practitioner of an impenetrable art, who often uses indecipherable jargon and engages in mysterious and unexplained (but probably expensive) activities. Predictably, the average client experiences unwelcome feelings of dependency or loss of control.

What clients frequently want is someone who will take away their worries and absorb all their hassles. ..Yet all too often, they encounter professionals who add to their worries and create extra headaches, forcing them to confront things they would prefer to ignore. Since clients are often anxious and uncertain, they are, above all, looking for someone who will provide reassurance, calm their fears, and inspire confidence.

It can take some time for many advisors to realize that it is a central part of their profession to develop these interpersonal skills. Certainly no one ever teaches them to us in our training, either in school or inside the typical professional firm.