WHY YOUR PARTNERS SHOULD RUN YOUR CLIENT LISTENING INTERVEIWS

By Sue-Ella Prodonovich

One of the most common questions I'm asked about client feedback is 'who should run the interviews'. And the general presumption among those asking this question is that it shouldn't be the partners.

Clients, they reason, will be less intimidated, more comfortable - and therefore more honest - speaking with an independent party, or at least someone who's not involved in doing their work. They'll open up, spill the beans and share the kind of unfiltered thoughts that they never could express directly to the fee earner.

But I think this line of thinking does your clients an enormous disservice. In my more than 25 years (gosh!) of being involved in client interviews, I can't ever recall a time when a client felt so intimidated by a service provider that they wouldn't speak openly with them. That's doubly so where they're paying top dollar for your advice and expecting to get value for the money they spend.

WHY CLIENTS REALLY WON'T TALK

While it's true that some clients may not speak openly with you, it's not that they're intimidated. It could be they're worried about offending you, or they're over having the umpteenth client feedback meeting covering the same ground, or they don't want to tackle your questionnaire. So you've got to make it easy for them. Cut your feedback cloth to suit each client contact.

In other words, it's about you; not them. It's about how you listen, what your work and your behaviour looks like well after the interview is over; and how it's going to impact the way your firm deals with them.

CLIENTS LOVE PARTNERS

But before we get to that, here's why I think clients are actually often really impressed when a partner - or other senior member of your team - takes the time out to listen to them.

1. It shows you're serious
They know how much your partner usually charges and they'll be sitting back, doing a mental calculation of how much it's costing you to send them. They'll also often be thankful that they're talking to the 'butcher and not the block' - that is, that their thoughts, feelings and concerns are going straight to the top.

2. They'll notice the point of difference
While your rivals mess around with delegating the role, you'll be bringing out the big guns. If

you pitch your firm as being client-centric then this walks that talk – it shows the client exactly how much you mean to them and the value you place on their views.

3. They get to see how they stack up

We all love to compare ourselves and clients are no different. They'll enjoy the opportunity to ask a senior person for opinions and find out how they size up.

4. They learn from it

A well-run client listening program is a thing of beauty. Your Partners will get to see how your client experiences your firm then apply what they've learned to their own clients.

HOW TO RUN A PROPER PARTNER-LED CLIENT LISTENING PROGRAM

Now you know why you should use a partner to carry out your client feedback, here's how to get it right.

- **Formulate a strategy and then design your questions and your conversation around it.** Go in with a game plan and stick to it. Better still, package up what you'll be asking and share it with the client beforehand. Let them know that nothing is off the table. That way you'll save time, get more considered answers and avoid annoying them unnecessarily.

- **Be crystal clear about the rules of engagement.** For Pete's sake, let the client know how you'll be using the feedback and what purpose it will serve. Also, make sure they know you're not using it as an opportunity to cross-sell your services or to ask for testimonials.

- **Give your people the skills they need.** Carrying out a client feedback interview is a skill - and one that can be learned. Invest in training the partners who'll be carrying out your client listening sessions. You should also train up your CEO, Chair and BD professionals at the same time.

- **Work out what you'll do if things don't go according to plan.** If the meeting goes pear-shaped - and, no matter how prepared we are, a certain percentage of interviews always will - you need to know how you're going to salvage it and keep the client onside.

- **Pick the right person.** Finally - and perhaps most importantly of all - choose the right person to run it. This should be a partner who can get on well with the client contact and build rapport. You should also appoint a second person who'll be the scribe. They can add a couple of extra questions. But their real job is to listen and provide their own interpretation of the client's responses. After all, the main interviewer will be caught up in the conversation. A second set of ears can make all the difference.

AND FINALLY…

If a Partner, Managing Partner, Retired Senior Partner, CEO or Chair wants to allocate their time to client listening, my advice it to do whatever you can to clear the roadblocks and make it easy for them. You'll impress the client, cement your relationship, and potentially get much more useful responses.

WANT MORE?

If you'd like to know more about building a partner-led client feedback program in your firm, **get in touch.**

FURTHER READING

Empson, Laura. (2018). *Elite Interviewing in Professional Organizations.* Journal of Professions and Organization. 5. 10.1093/jpo/jox010.

The Cheat's Guide to Starting a Client Listening Program

What to do When Your Client Feedback Meeting Doesn't Go To Plan?

How to Build a Successful Client Listening Program

3 Common Fears About Client Feedback (and How to Overcome Them)

5 More Fears About Client Feedback (and How to Overcome These Ones Too)

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