



HOW NOT TO ANNOY YOUR CLIENTS WHEN YOU ASK FOR FEEDBACK

By Sue-Ella Prodonovich

Client feedback is now a well established and proven tool for business development in professional services. And yet, a lot of professionals are hesitant to ask for it. Mainly that's because they're worried about how their clients will respond. Will they get annoyed, refuse to answer and put a black mark against the firm's name? Or worse, will they write something scathing, leaving you embarrassed in front of colleagues?

If you're worried about asking for feedback because you think it will tick off your clients, read on. We'll show you 7 steps to making sure no one's nose gets out of joint.

1. BE UPFRONT

When it comes to giving feedback, clients tend not to like surprises - at least they tend not to like a massive survey arriving on their desk unannounced with the request that they fill it out in the next week or so. Your clients' time is precious and you need to treat it as such.

That means one of the real keys to successful client feedback is to always start by letting your client know that you intend to do it, so they can find some time for it in their calendar and don't feel ambushed. Better still, if you intend to ask them how a project went, tell them that at the start, not at the end of it, then remind them again closer to the time.

2. PUT IT IN CONTEXT

In my experience, it's always easiest to get something out of someone when they know what's in it for them. They don't want to give up hours of their time, thinking about you and analysing your performance, only for their comments to be binned or ignored.

So ask yourself, what exactly is it that a client is going to get out of your feedback? Is it a better, more responsive service? Is it a review of fees or processes, or both? Tell them what you'll be doing with the information and they'll be far more likely to help out. Just make sure here that you don't over promise and tell them that you'll be implementing everything they say. Client feedback should always be about listening and analysing, not about taking orders.

3. TIME IT PROPERLY

The timing of any move is as important as the move itself. Flexibility is key to being successful at most things in life. But too often, when it comes to feedback, professional services firms become rigid, robotic and dogmatic. They'll do it by rote: sending out a survey at the end of every matter, no matter what the time of year or asking for a whole batch of feedback at once, without regard for what their clients may be up to.

That said, timing it properly is also about asking your client for feedback while details are still fresh enough in their mind. Can you remember every last aspect of something you were involved in 12 months ago? I can't.

Finally, it's worth remembering that there are two types of feedback - transactional, which is about how a project has gone and relationship-based, which is about the overall state of affairs. The first tends to be more time-sensitive than the second.

4. BE BRAVE

Many times things won't have gone well with a client. And, when that happens, there can be a temptation to avoid asking for feedback (generally accompanied by the excuse that these aren't the type of clients you want anyway). I think that can be a big mistake.

In their book, [Extreme Trust](#), Don Peppers and Maureen Rogers argue that in the digital age, the flaws in any business will be exposed. One dodgy job and the whole world will find out in hours, if not minutes.

Today, you have no choice but to be honest and to face your flaws head on. People are connected. Word spreads quickly. Besides, if someone tells you something you don't want to hear, chances are others are thinking the same thing anyway. It's better that you hear it and act on it, rather than sweep it under the carpet.

5. BE PERSONAL

One of the sure-fire ways to have few, or no, clients respond to your request for feedback is to send out a generic "[Insert name here]" template email with a survey attached. That's the professional services equivalent of asking someone to rate their meal at The Pizza Hut or to fill out the "How'd we do?" form you get in a hire car.

The only people who will take the time to fill it out are those looking for a distraction or, more likely, those with a serious gripe against you. Instead, always make your request personal. Pick up the phone and speak to your client to let them know what's coming. Consider doing the feedback sessions face-to-face and send in someone to interview them - preferably someone senior.

Or better still, give them a choice.

You can read more about how to [run a client feedback session here](#).

6. SAY THANKS

It's shocking how few firms take the time to go back to the people they interviewed and say thank you. Come on, people. They've done you a big favour, the least you can do is acknowledge that.

Better still, use this opportunity to let them know how their feedback was used. Tell them what you found and how you're acting on it. If you interviewed them as part of an overall project, give them the results, even if they're not all glowing. After all, clients are smart - they

know your weaknesses, as well as your strengths. And, besides, if you look at any review website, what's more convincing? The five star rating or the 4.8?

I think it's the latter.

7. WASH. RINSE. REPEAT.

You'd be surprised by how many firms still base what they do on a round of client feedback they received in 2002. "They told us they didn't like receiving advices by fax, so we switched to email. It made people a lot happier."

You're probably not surprised to find out that this is the wrong approach. Good client feedback isn't a one-off thing. It's systematic, regular and consistent. It's a process of continual improvement and - just as importantly - it's a chance to show your clients how you've improved each time you speak to them.

WANT MORE?

When it's done properly, client feedback can be a wonderful tool for business development and growth.

If you'd like help setting up and running an effective client listening program in your firm, [get in touch](#).

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Peppers D & Rogers M (2016) [Extreme Trust: Honesty as a Competitive Advantage](#), Penguin Random House



Sue-Ella is the Principal of [Prodonovich Advisory](#), a business dedicated to helping professional services practices sharpen their business development practices, attract and retain clients and become more profitable.

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