

## THE ULTIMATE REFERRAL – WINNING STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING IDEAL CLIENTS

Few tools pack the marketing punch of a strong referral. So why do service professionals struggle with the process of asking for referrals? One reason is that most of the advice we get about generating referrals just doesn't work for service professionals. Traditional thinking about referrals has us pleading with clients for a list of people we can "help." That turns referral marketing into a beg-a-thon. There is a better way.

### ***Rethinking Referrals***

"Can you help me identify others that would benefit from my services?" It's a simple question, but many service professionals would rather undergo an appendectomy than pop the referral question. The hesitation to ask for referrals lingers, even though the odds of winning work skyrocket when a prospective client calls you as result of a referral.

Building a business using referrals should be a no-brainer. After all, what could be better than having a satisfied client wax eloquent about you to your prospective clients? Granted, a referral doesn't guarantee anything, but it does give you a potent calling card.

### ***Most Referral Strategies are Flawed***

Common referral strategies - often based on begging clients to open their rolodexes for you – can fail miserably. To begin with, asking for a referral can put a referrer on the hot seat. Recommending someone's services to a colleague can be akin to suggesting a chiropractor when the person really needs a spine surgeon. If your client doesn't fully understand why a colleague might need **your** service, it's difficult for the client to make a confident referral.

Another flaw is that it's easy to get branded as a self-interested salesperson if you ask a client, "Can you help me meet others that can benefit from my services?" Most clients know how important marketing is to the health of any business, but engaging a client in your marketing process can be off limits. More than one professional has gotten the cold shoulder after asking for referrals in the wrong way.

### ***The Ultimate Referral***

The best referral is a **qualified one that you don't have to ask for**. Rather than pleading with clients to dredge up a list of names for you, consider a strategy to generate unsolicited referrals. It's gratifying and profitable when a client volunteers, "I know an executive who could also use your help."

Before a client will offer an unsolicited referral, two important milestones must be reached.

- You will have to consistently deliver on the promise of your services, plus a little bit more. Look for opportunities to broaden your value to the client beyond the project you're working on. Help your client sort out other pressing issues by providing insights, relevant articles, and books, or by serving as a sounding board. Keep your interests focused on the client's needs, and you'll be on your way to that unsolicited referral.
- Remember that stellar work and a trusting relationship aren't enough to generate an unsolicited referral. Your client must also know enough about **your** business to make a productive referral. Without that knowledge, referrals will be hit or miss, which can be a costly way to try to build your business.

As you work with clients, help them understand the breadth of your capabilities and how your services can be



used most effectively. Not only will that knowledge help clients make more targeted referrals, it also helps them learn about other ways you can assist them.

You can extend a client's knowledge of your business without resorting to a hard sell. It's natural to share examples of other client work you've done as you work on a project. Use your case studies, articles, and war stories to communicate the full spectrum of your capabilities. In such conversations, it's typical to hear a client say, "I had no idea you did that." This subtle process of education will take the guesswork out of referrals.

Keep in mind that clients will brand your services in ways that make sense to them, not necessarily in the way you intend. To be sure that you are positioned appropriately, be systematic about bringing your client up to speed on your business.

### ***Jump on Unsolicited Referrals***

What should you do if your client approaches you and says something like, "I've sure been happy with your work. Is there some way I can help you?" You should be thrilled - and prepared to respond immediately. **Never let such an opportunity pass, not even for a minute.**

If you're not sure how to best use the generous offer of help, at the very least, ask your client to serve as a reference when you are pursuing other work. You could also ask for and help the client draft a short, written testimonial that you could use for marketing purposes.

Don't squander the goodwill of your client by saying you'll get back to the person. Graciously accept the gift your client is giving you by immediately providing concrete, quality information on how she or he can help.

### ***Sometimes They Need a Nudge***

Even though an unsolicited referral is preferred, there's a time and place for asking directly for referrals. Instead of soliciting a list of names, however, target your request. Ask the client for an introduction to a specific person that you believe would be immediately helpful to you.

When you ask, be candid about why you want an introduction, and discuss how you plan to follow up. By clarifying your intentions, the client will have ample information to give you a ringing endorsement, and the prospective client will be better prepared to take your call.

### ***Remember to Follow Up***

And finally, remember to follow up by going back to the referrer and letting him or her know how the referral was helpful and what it provided to you. People like to know they've made a positive contribution, so be sure and give them the acknowledgment they crave. In our work, we sometimes have person A lead us to B who leads us to C who leads us to the destination, D. We make sure we then go back to each person and let that person know that his/her referral ultimately led us to success.

To harness the power of referrals, strive for quality, not quantity. You'll spend less time, money and effort when you chase a short list of qualified opportunities, instead of a long list of maybes.

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