



*Worldly accomplishment and spiritual fulfillment are complementary aims. Each enriches the other when they are explored in tandem with mindfulness and commitment. The Soul of Business Success is my system for pursuing business success and spiritual fulfillment through one integrated path. This article addresses one dimension of SBS: cultivating client partnerships that help your business thrive.*

## **From Client to Partner** *by Michele Lisenbury Christensen*

Want more business?  
More profitability?  
Less marketing expense?  
More customer loyalty?

By teaming with your clients or customers as partners, you can create all these outcomes with the same amount of energy (or less!) that you use now. The simple strategies you'll learn in this article will help you cultivate a loyal cadre of customers who will:

- evangelize for your services with those around them
- never shop around on the basis of price
- tell you everything you need to know to keep your products and services current
- give you all your best ideas, free of charge

### **Assume they're on your side**

Presuming goodwill from customers may seem like common sense to some businesspeople, but to others (and for all of us, at times!), this is a tall order! Have your customers ever felt like the enemy? Robbing you of time? Squandering your energy on petty requests and unreasonable demands? Beating you down on price, while expecting your very best all the time? If you're remembering any times when you felt exasperated by these experiences, then THOSE are the times when I invite you to heed this tip! Shift your focus around. Know that whatever your customers are doing is their way of telling you how better to serve them and how better to run your business. All things work together for good, and your customers are no exception. Particularly at those times when you just want to lock the door and shut them all out, they've got a powerful lesson for you that can jump your business to the next level.

### **Appreciate them...**

Simple customer service basics never steer you wrong: make sure customers know, every single time you connect with them, that YOU know they're your *raison d'etre*. Tell them what you most like about serving them, in particular. Cultivate "crushes" on customers who're really IDEAL for you and your business. By so doing, you align yourself energetically with other customers just like them! What you appreciate and focus on expands, in business as in every other dimension of the universe.

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### **Amuse and delight them**

The businesses whose customers are an avid team of researchers, developers, competitor spies, salespeople, and shelf-straighteners are the businesses who have a culture their customers just LOVE to hang out in. Think about it in your life: what businesses - whether a grocery store, a restaurant, a massage therapist's practice, or a plumber's service - are you tickled to use, just because the personality of the owner, staff, or the company itself just shines through everything they do? From the policies to the signage, from the invoices to the packaging, from the newsletter to the collection strategies, loyalty-inspiring businesses show their personalities in everything they do. They bring warmth, wit, style, and excellence to everything they do. They care, they enjoy the work, and it shows. That enjoyment is contagious.

### **Over-communicate with them**

If you want customers to stay one step ahead of your product- (or service-) development curve, let them know where you are on the curve. If you want them to eagerly anticipate your next new addition, tell them about every stage in the process. If you want them to buy your whole line, educate them about the marvels of the products or services they haven't used lately. If you want them to think of you when they're not working directly with you, be in front of them, adding value for them in ways they don't even pay you for! Free client newsletters, coupons or discounts for services and products that complement yours, tips on how to make the most of your product (even using LESS of it or saving money using it!?!), and specific, even minute ("how do you like the color of the lever on the genecktigazoink?") requests for feedback from them are all good ways to over-communicate with clients.

### **Never let them down (especially not when you mess up)**

Marketers call them "moments of truth" - those times when your actions can make or break a client relationship. Believe it or not, a screw-up is a moment of truth, but not because it's all over when something goes wrong. That's your chance to REALLY shine in your customer's eyes, IF you run with the ball. In my own experience, these customer service failures MUST fall within YOUR control -- if your customer service is outsourced to a vendor you don't truly have jurisdiction over, or if you're relying on technology or personnel you can neither trust nor replace, you're consigned to a world of hurt when something goes wrong! Make sure that the crucial pieces of your customers' interactions with you are 100% covered, and that you've got an iron-clad plan for picking up the pieces with STYLE and ADDED value when things go wrong. If you do, you'll earn not only respect but loyalty. They know you'll go to bat for them, so why switch?

### **Teach them how to use your products and/or services**

Whether you're working with a new client or a long-time "partner," all your customers have something to learn from you about how to get more from what you do. The magic of education is that customers see more value without your having to personally or physically put in more resources. Example: when customers find six new uses for your widget, they get six new problems solved without your having to solve them; they buy more because they need more. When they find a new way to make their supplies go further, rather than reducing demand for your products and services, you're actually engendering loyalty by saving them money and effort. And when customers are up to speed with how you INTENDED your offerings to be used, they are up on the front lines, the cutting edge WITH you, and therefore in a great position to help you innovate.

This works in every industry - if you've got restaurants, teach people when to take one another out. If you've got commodities, show people how to use more - or less - of what you offer. Personal service? Teach people how to give you to others and how frequently to come in and how to prepare for and follow up from what you do to maximize their benefits. You're the expert - now become the teacher!

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### **Teach them how to talk about you**

Are you getting more referrals than you know what to do with? If not, it's probably because people don't know how to talk about you, your products, or your services. It saddens me to see the sign of another real estate agent pop up on our street, when I know my favorite pair of agents does their best to OWN this street in terms of selling these homes. They're simply not yet infiltrating everyone's consciousness 100% yet. Your customers need to think of you as the only game in town -- and what's more, they need to think of you as the best thing they could do for someone. They need to know how to explain what you do and to have at the ready a supply of literature or at least business cards to make calling you easy for everyone they know. If you're in a non-essential business, like personal services, you'll want to get contact information from your referral sources so that YOU can contact the new customer instead of waiting for THEM to contact YOU. For more information on effective referrals, please e-mail me for my article about the referral chain.

### **Reward good behavior**

What do you wish your clients or customers would do? What do you wish they would do less often? It's a basic tenet of both behavioral psychology and economics that we all do what we're rewarded for doing. Put the reward principle to work for you: find the 5 key behaviors you want to either encourage or prohibit and reward customers for compliance. This might mean a discount for prompt payment, a frequent buyer bonus, a referral thank-you gift or special privileges for customers who don't require customized service. Whatever your business, you can change your customers' behavior by giving them strong incentives to do things your way!

### **Constantly ask how you can solve their problems**

Today's problems (for your customers) are tomorrow's gold mine (for them AND for you!). You don't have to bilk anyone to profit from un-solved problems and unmet needs. Everyone benefits when you innovate based on what your customers need and do not have. The trick is to get them to explain what doesn't work. This takes 3 key ingredients: (1) Leisure: The 'troubled' person has to have the space to reflect on what's working and what's not. (2) Trust: They have to believe that you care, that you can help, and that you are going to help in a way that will work for them (3) Sincerity: Not every customer is a good candidate for need-searching. The few who are, are truly 'friends' even if you don't socialize together. They have an earnestness, a desire to help you help them. You'll know who they are. As for the rest, serve them, too... just don't look to them as your R&D team!

### **Customize, then generalize**

The old 80/20 rule is amazingly accurate across a broad range of applications. New product and service development is no exception - 80% of your best ideas will come from the most innovative, communicative, or loyal 20% of your customers. These 20% will tell you what the other 80% don't know how to say. When you use their ideas to create new products and services, people who NEVER would've asked for those customizations will LOVE that you offer the new style/plan/dealy-bopper because it meets their needs better than they could have known it would. So notice who your 'innovators' are and take them to lunch! Give them a little latitude to experiment at little extra cost to them, and thank them profusely (and in a way that means something to them, personally!) whenever they invest energy in teaching you how to serve them ... and the other 80%!

These are just a few of the specific ways your clients can become your partners. The attitude of partnership is far more important than the details of how it comes about, however. Once you're playing as if you and your customers are on the same joint venture team, the partnerships will roll forward from there. You'll innovate in ways no one can imagine right now. May these new ways of working and playing together prosper you, your clients, and the world. May we all enjoy the Soul of Business Success!

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## Recommended Reading for Cultivating Partnerships with Your Clients:

***Permission Marketing: Turning Strangers into Friends and Friends into Customers*** by Seth Godin

**Nichecraft** by Dr. Lynda Falkenstein

***Selling the Dream: How to Promote Your Product, Company, or Ideas-And Make a Difference-Using Everyday Evangelism*** by Guy Kawasaki

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