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Handling Growth: It's All in the Transition

By Pamela Mills-Senn—February 26, 2007

It's the stereotypical catch-22. Your personal involvement with your clients has contributed to your success, and growth seems inevitable. Yet, if you do take that leap, you jeopardize the face-to-face involvement you've built your business—and your success—on.

How do you become less present without alienating your customers and risking your bottom line?

It's all in how you handle the transition, says Ray Silverstein, author of *The Best Secrets of Small Businesses*.

"You have to get the customer's confidence in the organization as a whole and in the staff," Silverstein explains. "The way to do this is to bring another person in on the account, handle it together for a time and then back out."

Introduce the new contact/associate to the customer (be certain to hire employees who share your values, Silverstein cautions) and build him/her up. Stress that the associate is better positioned than you are to provide personal attention.

At the same time, let the customer know you're going to remain involved for a time (depending on the business, this could be anywhere from one to three months). If the customer calls with a question or request, take it, but have the associate come back with the response. This builds confidence toward that associate and helps ease the client into the transition.

"You still have to take your customers' temperature and see if they're happy," Silverstein says. "This cannot be an abrupt break because clients will feel used and abused. And emphasize to the employee that there's a real opportunity for more responsibility and growth, and then support this."

Let's take a look about how two companies successfully managed their growing pains and customers.

Traci Bisson, owner of Bisson Barcelona, a full-service publicity firm based in Barrington, New Hampshire, had been doing it all herself. But she soon reached a dilemma. Should she take on less work or forge ahead, hire more staff and hit the growth road? She chose the latter. Last year, Bisson added five employees and began transitioning her clients.

Local clients met face-to-face with Bisson and the new point-of-contact. She talked with them about her business and about the employee's skills. She took this same approach with out-of-town clients via conference calls, though she first notified them by letter to give them a chance to mull things over before the call.

Bisson was still available to clients, providing them with her cell phone number and making biweekly calls to monitor the new relationships. One of the most helpful things she did was sitting down with key clients to discuss her goals and solicit their feedback about the change.

"I found that by making them a part of the vision, they were more comfortable with the transition," she says.

Jeff Greenhouse, founder and president of Singularity Design, a Philadelphia-based, interactive agency that helps businesses build an Internet brand presence, took a similar approach. For years, he had a large ownership of the work that ran through his company—a hands-on approach that constrained his growth. Realizing this, three years ago he began transferring work to other people in the organization.

The first step was convincing customers this was a benefit.

"They can tell when you're overextended and can't give them attention," he says. "I told them the new point-of-contact was going to be able to give them more focused

continued

attention, and that in many ways, they were getting someone that was actually a better fit. I had to sell this as an upgrade.”

Greenhouse was careful not to make what he believes is a common mistake.

“The customer should not receive a call out of the blue from the new point-of-contact,” he says. “What I found worked best was a one-on-one with them. I explained the transition and the benefit, and then scheduled another call or meeting to introduce the new point-of-contact and to repeat some of the selling points. Then I let the new person take over.”

You should still stay on the call, he continued, but you very symbolically hand over the reins. However, he warned, make sure the new associate is fully briefed on the customer’s business. Otherwise, you’ll destroy the client’s confidence in the transition—and in you.

What if customers refuse to accept the transition?

“We’ve had this happen,” he said. “When it does, you have to gently turn them back to the associate. Sometimes this means another three-person phone call.”

If you sense continued discomfort, ask why, he advises. You may end up deciding that it fits into your business plan to continue handling that customer, or you may have to let them go.

“But if you do decide to deal with them, let them know they may not get as an immediate response from you as they would from the point-of-contact,” he suggests. “Remind them you’re making this transition because you’re a very limited resource. And if it takes a few tries to make a transition, keep at it.” ■



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