



When should you make
your move?

When should you make your move? When you have been trying to develop, or 'court', a new client for some time (building the relationship, getting to know the client, perhaps meeting a number of people, but not yet winning any work), how do you know when to start 'selling'? If you move too quickly the client could see you as pushy with only one thing on your mind, which could destroy all of the positive feelings you have built up so far. If you move too slowly (or not at all) you may miss real opportunities, both for you and the client, and you could still be courting this client many years from now – to everyone's frustration.

There is clearly no magic formula for success here – every client and every situation is unique. What is appropriate in one situation will not work in another: some people want to be sold to; others want to be in total control of the buying process.

Obviously, instinct must guide your actions ("I just know when the time is right"), but do you have to rely solely on instinct? Is this something that some people get right naturally while others never do? This article is an attempt to give instinct a helping hand – to give those who do this well already the confidence of continued success and to give those who struggle in this area some ideas to increase their confidence and their success.

Firstly, two words of warning:

- 1 It does not matter how quickly you want to move the relationship forward, how desperate you are for work or how frustrated you are with the lack of progress. All that matters is the speed that is right for the client – who might, after all, be very content with his or her current providers, at least for the present.
- 2 Whether now is the time to 'make a move' or not does not depend on how much time you have invested in the relationship so far. It may well take time to succeed but the amount of time invested is not the deciding factor. What matters is what you have done with the time, and crucially what impact you have had on the client's mind.

So, when you should make a move/take the initiative – and what that move should be – depends completely on the client's mind at that time and how they feel about you and what you can offer. In order to know what to do and when you need to understand:

- Whether any opportunities exist currently for them to buy your services;
- How you compare to their existing providers – in their mind;
- How credible you and your organisation now are;
- How much they trust you and value the relationship they have with you;
- What they like about what you can do; and
- How interested/keen/(desperate!) they are to give you a chance with a first piece of work.

As well as understanding the situation (as the client sees it) your chances of success will obviously depend on how well you have 'courted' them so far. So what does 'good' courting look like? It is manifestly not:

- "We have had a few coffees and a few chats, he seems to like me and I know he supports Arsenal!";
- "I have met him a couple of times and put him on our database" (which means he receives a raft of information which he has long since given up scouring in the hope of finding something relevant to him); or
- "He comes up in my contact management system every six weeks and I phone him to 'keep in touch'."

'Good' courting includes:

- Selection. This client/individual must be worth the effort needed for success;
- A focus on understanding. Much of your time together should be spent on really getting to know the client – not on talking too much;
- Adapting your style and approach. The relationship building needs to be carried out in a way that best fits the client, not necessarily the way that would be most natural or instinctive for you!;
- Treating the new contact as you would your most important client – not just as a target to be 'won'. You need to demonstrate, over time, what it would be like to be a client of yours. This involves being as generous as possible with what and whom you know. Remember, if this client is worth winning it will be hard to win – consider for a moment how hard it would be for one of your competitors to steal your best-defended client from you; and
- Teamwork. Involving more people from your side to engage with more people on the client's side will give you the best possible chance of one or more people on your side getting the chemistry right ('clicking') with one or more people on the client's side.

And what is the aim of all this courting? It is to 'build the client's motivation to buy' – at the right time, i.e. as quickly as possible but without any feeling of pressure. How long does a courtship take to achieve that level of motivation? Six years, six months, six weeks, six days? All of the above, and sometimes even shorter – or longer! The advice here is not "go slowly", it is "go at the right pace in each situation with each new client". And at some point you need to take the initiative ('sell') – when it is right to do so – after all, your client will understand that this is a business relationship you are building. Provided it is not done in a clumsy way, asking whether there are opportunities for which you might be considered is not an unreasonable thing to do.

So, returning to our initial question, when should you make your move? And the answer – when the client wants you to, and when he or she will be most likely to say yes. And how do you know?:

- You know when (and how) to make a move because you know the mind of the client;
- You know the mind of the client because your courting has focused on building mutual understanding and on exploring the client's world with genuine and sustained interest;
- You know as much about this potential client and his or her situation as you do about the clients you already work with.
- Maybe you know the client has a plan that you could help them to achieve – or there are challenges and opportunities looming in the client's world that you could help them to deal with – and, because you have given them some 'free advice' (brought them ideas, innovation and insights) in the past in this area, you have built real credibility and demonstrated genuine interest;
- One or more 'trigger events' are occurring in the client's world that mean their existing providers are not as suited to their needs as they once were. These triggers could include change in the client's: Strategy and plans for growth (or survival); Marketplace; Personnel, especially senior management; Financial performance; Purchasing strategy; or Ownership.

You also know how the client feels about you and your organisation. You might know that:

- The client is keen to give you a chance to work with them and is just trying to find an opportunity – in this case, you can make your move; or
- The client believes you have a capability that is at least as good as their existing providers, that you understand them well enough to deliver your expertise in just the right way and that it would be of benefit to them to use you – once again, make your move; or
- The client is becoming more impressed but either has no specific opportunity or challenge that he or she could see you working on or as yet sees no real reason to consider a new provider – in this case you should delay your move and invest more time in the relationship and in building this client's motivation to buy.

One final piece of advice: don't ignore your instinct, but beware of relying on it when deciding when and how to make your move. You wouldn't want to ruin a potentially beautiful relationship by getting it wrong at this stage!



The PACE Partners
75 Newman Street
London
W1T 3EN

t +44 (0)1932 260062
e tpp@thepacepartners.com

www.thepacepartners.com