

Don't Be an Expert, Be a Trusted Advisor

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Promoting your "expert" status may not be the best strategy.

o achieve success in your field, you must have a competitive edge. And you must, of course, know what you're doing. But promoting your "expert" status may not be the best strategy. Gaining true expert status takes time—journalist Malcolm Gladwell argues that it takes 10,000 hours or more—and the term is overused in marketing. Not only has it lost much of its prestige, consumers may hesitate to contact an expert for fear of being overwhelmed by facts or numbers.

When searching for goods or services, consumers want to go to a source they're comfortable with. You'd rather take your problem to a trusted friend or a college professor—and consumers would too.

Marketing Consultant Ian Brodie calls being a trusted advisor "the holy grail of professional services," and it is the ideal role for you to fill. A trusted advisor is reliable and approachable—a person with the perfect combination of knowledge and wisdom.

Consumers reach out to these individuals because they feel a personal connection and are reassured that their best interests are in mind. Becoming a trusted advisor is essential for every professional. Creating this type of dynamic with your client base adds to your overall value. If consumers feel confident and comfortable with you, they will be more loyal and likely to recommend your services to others. Cultivate this reputation, and your business will grow.

The Kevs to "Trust"

So how do you become a trusted advisor in the eyes of your consumers? Pay attention to the key word: Trust. As writer Doug Hall points out in Businessweek, "when distrust rules, it's harder for entrepreneurs to sell customers on the wonders of their new products and services." Therefore, you must first cultivate a personal relationship with your

clients. Savvy consumers know when they're being treated as a number and not a person. Therefore you must use every opportunity to establish trust by emphasizing your personal commitment and professional knowledge. Remember that maintaining your reputation as a trusted advisor takes constant effort. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Always listen: Really listen to what your consumer is saying. Showing that you care about and understand their problem validates their concerns. When you can present yourself as the solution to their problem, they'll feel they are truly being taken care of—and that increases your value.

Show your knowledge: You're already involved in your field, so you certainly know what you're talking about. But make sure to show consumers that you follow the latest trends and news in your industry. Even better, help them understand what's happening and how it affects them. They want you to talk to them, not at them (a big difference between advisor and expert). If they understand what you're saying, they'll feel more confident in their decision.

Continue communication: Use social media and other platforms to present yourself as a trusted advisor. Blog about your customer's problems, address industry news, create resource directories, and reach out to your network to offer solutions and welcome dialogue. Fostering that communication will make consumers more likely to approach you—or recommend you — next time your services are in need.

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