

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PERSONNEL SERVICES

Independent Study Course Number 30

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Client Service or Dis-Service – You Decide

By Mary Beth Elmer, CPC, CTS

Articles are written every day about companies succeeding by delivering superior client service in intensively competitive markets. There are several traits that distinguish these companies and gain them this recognition: a method of operation, a commitment to account management over account development, and an absolute belief in their product or service. All of these areas reflect an active decision to make client service the top priority.

The first trait distinguishes companies with great client service is their method of operation. They do what they say they will do, when they say they will do it, using a process that is understood by everyone, including the client. If they cannot do what they promised on time by the process discussed, that too is shared with the client.

This first trait is easy to implement in the personnel services industry. When first working with a new client, you should explain in some detail the process you will use to complete the assignment. Explaining what you will do allows the client to voice concerns, preferences, and expectations. Once all these areas are explored, answered, and agreed upon, you can proceed with the assignment. To best explain how you will complete the assignment, assess the process you use now. Will you recruit, will you fill the assignment through existing inventory, or will you advertise the position? Will you be providing complete background narratives, resumes, or data sheets? Will the client be interviewing by phone, in person at its location, or in person at your location? What are the time frames that need to be accommodated? How much candidate preparation is necessary? How many interviews will take place before a decision is made?

If you are a temporary service, how will you fill the order? Are the needed number of temps in current inventory? Is this assignment large enough to require an on-site supervisor? Does the client require interviews? Is there any special training involved in filling this order? Who will do the training? Can you meet the client's time frame?

Based on this assessment, develop a clear, concise statement of how you will address the assignment from this particular client. Each client is different and it is your job to know what features of the process will best suit the client's expectations and preferences. Be prepared to adjust the process, within reason, to accommodate changing client expectations and the demands of the assignment.

Because you and the client agree to a set of expectations and preferences, you have an obligation to inform the client, once you have started the assignment, if you can or cannot meet expectations is the set feedback deadlines with the client. Initial feedback should be delivered no later than 48 hours after initiating an assignment (ideally, the initial feedback should happen within 24 hours). Updates should be delivered weekly until the assignment is completed.

This same process should be followed with existing clients. Assuming that the client understands or even remembers the initial expectations and preferences is detrimental to the relationship. Getting constant feedback from existing clients also accommodates any changes in the client's business since the last assignment. Finally, your client will appreciate the opportunity to review and fine-tune the process.

The second train that distinguishes companies with great client service is their emphasis on account management. They value existing, long-term clients over new ones because these companies know it is less expensive to acquire additional business from an existing account than to develop a new one. This commitment to building an account allows a company, over time, to excel at client service and set the standard by which competitors will be judged.

The account management philosophy is a little more difficult to implement in the personnel services industry. Our industry is driven by account development and the need to "feed the pipeline" with new assignments from new clients. Consequently, we gather the minimum amount of information required to do our work and fail to fully address client expectations and preferences. In many instances, we assume our clients understand exactly how we will complete the assignment and fail to educate them on the value we bring to filling their staffing needs. When we fail to take the time to manage an account, we make ourselves vulnerable to competition and, in some cases, fee disputes.

Account management begins with the first marketing call to a potential client. As you acquire knowledge about the prospect, you can demonstrate how you would meet their needs and expectations using the assessment you have completed of your work process. This assessment also demonstrates your willingness to accommodate the unique needs of that potential client. Once a prospect becomes a client, you can then focus on fine-tuning the process and agreeing on expectations and preferences for the assignment.

After the assignment is completed, review the process with the client to discuss whether all the expectations and preferences were met, what it liked about the process, and what it would change. This information is critical to account management and client service.

While many of us are experts at debriefing candidates, debriefing clients is often ignored. The assumption is that if they didn't complain or pull the assignment, they must have liked

what we did. A quick gauge of whether or not this assumption is true is to count up how many repeat clients you are doing business with currently. If repeat customers do not outnumber new customers, then you had better build your client debriefing skills.

A good method of use in debriefing clients is to develop a form that addresses the generic pieces to every assignment, and then an addendum that addresses the specific expectations of this assignment. Indicate on the form what changes in the process were made at the client's request. Debrief yourself first. What do you think worked? What didn't work? Why? If something didn't work, was it part of your standard process or a change requested by the client? What hampered the success of this change in the process?

After you have analyzed the process, debrief the client. No process is perfect so expect some criticism. If there are areas where your analysis matched the client's analysis, share this with the client. Take careful notes of where the client was displeased but try to stay neutral during the conversation. If the client was pleased with the process and the results, make note of those areas that were particularly valued so they can be applied to the next assignment.

It is best to not react to negative feedback while on the phone with the client. You need to take the time to carefully analyze the feedback and why the process resulted in negative feedback. If there are areas that can be fine tuned, take those recommendations to the client. If the negative feedback was a result of something you could not control, make note of it and be sensitive to similar circumstances occurring in the future.

While the account management process may seem tedious, it is the best demonstration of the value you place on the client relationship and reinforces the value of the service you deliver.

The third trait that distinguishes companies with great client service is an unshakable belief in the value of their product or service. This belief becomes the driving force behind every client relationship. This belief is so strong that it is almost tangible.

This trait is the easiest of the three to implement in the personnel services industry. The value of your service is what you market daily to clients and potential clients. This value is reinforced with every assignment and client contact. It is what sets you apart from your competition and builds long-term client relationships.

To distinguish the value of your service, review your marketing materials and client presentations. These materials should not only demonstrate your ability to fill the client's staffing needs, but also indicate what sets you apart from your competition in the delivery of that service. This information should include areas of specialization, additional services offered to the client, and professional education. These materials should present all this information in a format that creates value from the client's perspective.

Once you are assured that your marketing materials address the value of your service, the rest is easy. Return to the first trait of a company that delivers great client service...do what you say you will do, when you say you will do it, and let your clients know how it will be done.

Great client service does not happen by accident. It is a daily course of action that sets client service as the top priority. Client service or dis-service, you decide.

CONTINUING EDUCATION UNIT (CEU) REGISTRATION

Complete the registration information below and forward this page, containing the independent study examination and your answers, plus payment to: NAPS, 3133 Mount Vernon Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22305. The processing fee for the continuing education units for each NAPS independent study course is \$10 for members and \$20 for non-members. Feel free to reproduce the registration and examination page to allow additional individuals to apply for CEUs.

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EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

True/false and multiple-choice questions. Circle the response you believe to be correct.
Be certain to answer all of the questions.

1. Which of the following is **not** a trait of a company delivering superior client service?
 - a. a method of operation
 - b. a quality corps of consultants
 - c. a commitment to account management over account development
 - d. an absolute belief in its product or service

2. Ideally, feedback from a client regarding his needs and expectations should occur within:
 - a. the same day
 - b. 24 hours
 - c. 48 hours
 - d. the same week

3. Account management begins with:
 - a. the initial candidate referral
 - b. information derived from the feedback process
 - c. the first marketing call to the potential client
 - d. none of the above

4. Because most clients are similar, a well-designed model of operation can be applied to most:
True
False

5. The staffing industry is driven by account development and the need to “feed the pipeline”:

True
False

6. While many staffing firms are expert at debriefing candidates, debriefing clients is often ignored:

True
False

7. Having an unshakable belief in the value of one's product or service is the most difficult trait to implement in the staffing industry:

True
False