



Manage key clients

Picking a few key clients to treat differently is a wonderful way to grow your firm and its capabilities. For these clients you don't just worry about selling more to them (although you are often happy to do that); for these clients you work especially hard to give them what they need even if that means changing what your firm does in order to meet those needs.

Your goals in creating a special effort for a key client is to have a long-term, mutually beneficial customer relationship between your firm and their organization, in which both sides have invested and from which both sides get a return. Key client management is different from either selling your normal services or tweaking them to be closer to what the client needs.

Successfully managing a key client requires a systematic process and approach as well as skills. Key steps include:

- Understand your own firm and its capabilities and barriers, and get commitment to deploy the firm
- Initiate a partnership
- Understand their business (their strategies, tactics and initiatives) beyond what you currently do
- Understand key players
- Understand competitors
- Establish a buying vision (how wonderful the world will be as you work together)
- Develop a joint plan tailored to them
- Execute it well
- Be a window into your own organization



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Understand your own firm and its capabilities and barriers, and get commitment to deploy the firm

In the partnership you hope to develop, you will need to be able to draw on and deliver the resources of your firm. So you need to understand what your firm can offer and you need to have some idea of the barriers to delivering those capabilities to clients. Can you easily draw on resources from other parts of the world or from other business units – or do compensation or governance issues make that hard? If there are individuals with important skills, how can you access them? How quickly does your firm agree to alliances to augment its own capabilities? How easy is it to alter policies or make exceptions to them, even with good justification?

In most organizations, getting the right resources or the right changes made in a timely way is difficult. That's why you need to get a commitment – often from the very top of the firm – that the work for the key client is in fact a strategic action for the firm and so the needs of your efforts will be accommodated. You can still expect a struggle but you'll have laid the groundwork for success at getting what you need from your own firm.

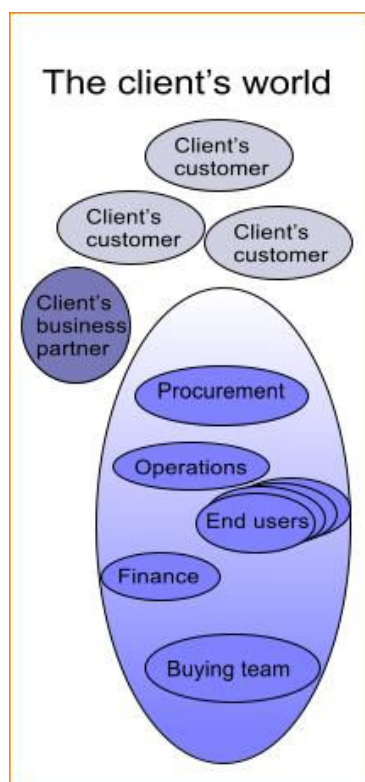
Initiate a partnership

You should be very clear with the client about what you are planning to do, the benefits that can accrue for them, and the results you are hoping for for your own firm. Ideally, this discussion should occur between a senior member of your firm (who will be acting as the sponsor of the project and not directly serving the client) and a senior executive of your client (typically above the level you usually interact with). At this point, you are probably only asking the client's executive to take the initial steps of a partnership and are offering from your side to make a serious commitment; you can expect the client to want to wait to see some results before taking any steps beyond helping you get started.

Understand their business – in depth

Outstanding professionals try hard to understand their client's business. For key clients though you want to go further. You want to know enough in detail and depth to be able to find unique ways for you to be valuable to them. You want to be able to explain to them that because of the situation that you've invented a unique way of working with them to address

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something that is very important to them. You want to know enough that you don't have to rely on them after a point to tell you about their current and emerging problems because you already know.

You want to understand the organization's strategies and the tactics that they are using to achieve those strategies. You want to understand who their key customers are and how the needs of those customers are changing. You want to understand who their important suppliers are, and how the needs of and pressures on those suppliers are changing. You want to think like a senior executive of the client's organization should be thinking.

You also want to understand the major initiatives they are undertaking or thinking about.

Understand key players

In key client management, the team from your firm needs to become experts on the people in the organization and to document what you know and learn.

You of course need to understand the organization chart. You also need to know a lot about each of the key people on that chart – what motivates them, what alienates them, how they like to work, how they like to be communicated with, who their friends and allies are, their histories and expected trajectories. What are the major political splits? You also need to know which people like your firm, which ones don't, and which ones are indifferent at the moment. And you need to know if they have an affinity for any of the firms you might compete with.

You also need to understand the informal organization. Who are the leaders on different issues, and who are key influencers?

For each of the key people, you want to understand where they are feeling pain. And you want to understand how that pain is linked to other people's problems. For each person with a challenge, people at other levels or elsewhere in the organization are contributing to that difficulty, and people at other levels or elsewhere in the organization are suffering from the results of the initial challenge. By understanding how problems are linked, you can show how the approaches you suggest will positively affect many people.

Make sure you don't forget to include any people or groups that might want to have a hand in making the decisions about your potential work or implementing it. They will find their way into the discussions, and it's

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much better if you plan for their participation. Purchasing and procurement managers have an increasing amount of influence on the purchase of many kinds of professional services.

In addition to understanding people within the company, you need to understand how the client competes in its markets and what it brings to its customers. You also need to understand any formal or informal partnership that the client participates in.

This understanding will let you draw a picture of all the people in the organization you might want to affect over time, and the other influences on them.

Understand competitors

You can expect competitors to be around, either currently or in the past and/or future. Who has the organization worked with before? Who are they working with now? Where are their areas of support? Who are their key supporters? Where do they have some very satisfied champions or unsatisfied customers within the client organization?

You also need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of your key competitors and how those strengths and weaknesses might help or hinder their position with this client.

Establish a vision with the client of how the world could be

If you and your client are going to work together (perhaps over a period of years) then it's vital that you agree on a picture of the desired future that excites your client. A key step in crafting the partnership is developing a joint picture of what success looks like for them – and the way that you are part of it.

This partnership should be crafted at the highest levels of each organization that you can manage; it would be great if it is between the leader of your firm and the head of the client organization, with you and your usual client individual serving as the key executors and managers of the joint effort. But even if it just you and someone from the client organization, you are having an elevated conversation about what they want to achieve and how you want to work together to get there.

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Develop a joint plan (tailored for them)

The joint plan outlines how you and they will work together to advance to the broader vision that the client has embraced. It can include a set of specific initiatives that you will undertake together. Some of these will be joint planning exercises, and others will be specific projects. You can expect to get paid for some of what you do, and the partner should be very aware of what executing the plan is going to cost.

Both the client and you can also indicate during the planning process which resources will be devoted to the plan's success. Who from your organization will be supporting each part of the effort? Who will be the key participants from their side?

In addition, the plan includes how you will communicate progress. At a minimum, the client needs to receive a formal report every quarter (at a formal meeting) that documents what was committed to, what was accomplished, and the benefits that are accruing to the client as a result. In addition, plans for addressing any issues or delays should be communicated.

The quarterly communication though is not enough. In addition, you and the client should identify a more frequent schedule for brief updates, information sharing and problem-solving.

Execute the plan well

Doing an outstanding job executing the plan is vital. You have made commitments and now need to deliver. The professional leading the effort has a huge responsibility to mobilize the necessary resources, deal with the inevitable problems that crop up, and keep the client informed and very happy throughout the process. The work must be done well, and the communication must be done well too, so the client both gets the value and understands that they have gotten the value.

Be a window into your own organization

As you work as partners with your client, help them learn more about your organization and its capabilities. Introduce them to more people from your organization. As a result, the density of ties and relationships will grow and the two organizations will become closer. More people in your organization will have a personal stake in this client's success and so more people (and the people this larger group can influence) will be willing to help you achieve what you need to.

Be a window

The CEO of a company located in a relatively remote part of the world traveled frequently. His consultant from a global consulting firm kept track of the CEO's upcoming travel and would always volunteer to set up a dinner for the CEO with one of the consultant's partners whenever the client was traveling to where the consulting firm had an office. As a result, the CEO felt that he had lots of people at the consulting firm who were interested in helping him.

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