

## intelligence vault

### MANAGING A PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRM

## how professionalism can be a (loyalty) differentiator

~ Mark Healy / Partner / Torque

Brett Favre has been traded to the New York Football Jets. Officially. Finally. I've been calling this thing Favrever. It marks the end (we think) of one of the most bizarre, poorly handled, brand and reputation degrading, public soap operas anyone who watches sports has ever seen played out. The whole thing smacked of a lack of professionalism. On all sides. Professionalism starts with respect – for others and for self – and manifests in actions and communication. The Packers' management team was relatively unknown until about a month ago. Favre is a legend – a Pro Bowler and a first ballot hall of fame lock. Yet for both parties, obscure or celebrity, comportment is the only thing being talked about.

There's a good lesson in all of this: people think of/remember you more for how you act than what you do.

I got a letter in the mail last week. It was from a VP at Corus Entertainment. I had previously written to the CEO of Corus in one of my regular bouts of guerilla-business-development. Here is what it said. (I'm paraphrasing) 'We don't want your services.' What's special about it is the organization took the time to craft a custom letter, print it on fancy, branded letterhead and express mail it to my office. It caught me by surprise – not because the news was negative (you win some, you lose some) – but because it came at all. The bar in my mind, for professionalism in business, at least in this town, is set so low right now that I actually kept the letter and phoned the VP to tell her I was impressed with her organization.

Sad. But true. Did I miss a memo? Has it become accepted practice to not return phone calls, or emails, or letters? Is it now cool to call someone up, express interest in their services, have them go to hours of trouble crafting a proposal/quote/whatever, and then not contact them again? Even after they call you to ask about the status. Repeatedly. How about canceling meetings at the last minute, or outright no-showing? I've stopped counting the number of times I've called on or phoned someone, at a prescribed hour, only to find they are still on vacation – or the number of deals I've wiped off my whiteboard, deals which are into a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> draft, because the potential client has disappeared into the Bermuda triangle.

My business partner (Mark Binns) and I talk about this often. We are both 33. And we feel like we are at the very trailing edge of old-school principles when it comes to business and dealing with other human beings. We have trouble understanding how other folks stay in business with their (in our opinion, perhaps we in the minority) shocking lack of business professionalism. We return every phone call and email, we don't cancel meetings whether with executives looking for projects or with students looking for jobs, and if we are just kicking tires we tell vendors as much and say Yes or No quickly.

If you buy this – that standards of behaviour and expectations have decreased – and you are running a SMB, you may have found a new differentiator. Not service per se, but business professionalism overall. Because it is part of the customer experience. A big part of it. And customer experience is the major driver of loyalty in marketing and in business.

To understand where business professionalism can be measured and improved in your business, a quick summary of customer experience mapping makes sense. This is a fancy term applied to a very straightforward idea: you should look at every interface between your company and your customers. Each of these customer



touch points should then be graded or measured for continuous improvement. For example, if you are running a medical supply company, your touch points will include obvious spots:

- Website
- Customer service department
- Sales and service reps in the field
- Delivery or fulfillment personnel

But, there are not-so-obvious spots where customers/stakeholders come into contact with your brand:

- Accounting and accounts payable (folks chasing you for their money)
- Investor relations firms, agencies or PR professionals acting on your behalf
- Even order updating or re-filling forms

As such, people will judge you on professionalism at every touch point. So, here are five very simple, yet commonly ignored, guidelines for professionalism which can set you apart from your competition:

### **1. Train basic etiquette into all your employees, as they are all brand ambassadors and customer experience drivers for your business**

This is table stakes for business professionalism. Everything else is predicted on having this down pat. Let's start with the very basics here. 'Please', 'thank you' and 'you're welcome', as well as 'good morning, this is Paul, Jane isn't available right now, may I take your name and number?' and 'I'll look into it and follow up with you in two days' go a long way these days. If you have employees whom you think could use a refresher – either on basic etiquette (we're not talking about what fork to start with) or on basic communication skills (grammar, active listening) – bring in a professional coach. It will save you from being the bad gal/guy, and is relatively inexpensive (\$200-\$500 for a good session).

### **2. Set standards and follow them vehemently**

The standards matter. And adhering to them matters more. Since communication is the first and usually most important touch point – whether it is an email sent in or a call placed to customer service – it is critical you make a good first and on-going impression. For the majority of SMBs, phone calls – all of them – should be returned on the same business day. Emails should be returned within 24 hours. If you are going to be away and not able to fulfill on your standards, you should re-record your voice mail directing callers to someone else, and you should set an out-of-office alert on your email. Your website should be easy to navigate, provide all contact information *including your phone number*, and it should be up 99.9% of the time (if it's not, change hosts). Look at your fulfillment promises (10 days for delivery, 20 minutes or it's free, etc.) and ensure you are meeting them consistently – you are better to relax them and manage expectations properly than to miss the mark on what you are promising. And keep all your meetings – canceling late or standing someone up is a real no-no.

One more note on training and standards. Hold your Partners (agencies, PR shops, etc.) to the same standards to which you hold your employees. They represent your brand.

### **3. Have the courage to say no. Quickly.**

Don't you hate it when you are pitching business and you can't get a straight answer from your prospect? We all do. So don't procrastinate when it's your turn. If the answer is no, pick up the phone and say No, and give your rationale.



#### 4. Don't fight, problem solve.

We have an expression: the client is always right, except when they're wrong, now we're really consulting. Don't fight with your clients/customers. No matter what the situation. Problem solve with them to get to a resolution. Sometimes letting a customer save face is more valuable than a discount. And if you are in the wrong, admit it, fix it, and move on.

#### 5. Pay on time.

You chase customers for money owed, right? To keep your A/R down? Pay people on time. It's one of the greatest signs of respect, and will buy you favours you may need if you get in pinch.

That's it. Pretty simple, but the devil is in the details. If you can execute on the five points above, you will have a leg up on your competitors regardless of other dimensions of your business.

*Mark Healy, P.Eng, MBA is a Partner at Torque Customer Strategy, a boutique marketing consultancy in Toronto, Canada. Torque focuses on bringing organizations closer to their customers via insight development and a no-assumptions™ model. Mark has completed over one hundred engagements in this new space over the last four years. He is regularly quoted in the national media on topics ranging from customer insight to managing professional service firms. Mark teaches "Customer Intimacy for Marketers" at the Canadian Marketing Association, and a "Demystifying Consulting" module at top Canadian business schools. His full bio can be found at [www.torquecustomerstrategy.com](http://www.torquecustomerstrategy.com).*

