

Strategic Empathy: Why Do Client's Hire You?

By Robert A. Potter

The most effective business development professionals have developed what I call Strategic Empathy – a thorough understanding of the rational and emotional drivers behind the client's decision to use their services. The more you know about how and why client's hire you, the more you can align your message and tactics to fit their motivation. As you build strategic empathy, prospects will be more willing to meet with you, share problems and explore solutions with you, make faster decisions, choose you over competitors and be more committed to working closely with you to assure the success of the engagement.

The purpose of this article is to explore the motivation behind your client's decision to use your service, so that you can better align your message and tactics to support that decision and win the business.

Two Decisions: Transformation Decision And Service Provider Decision

If you think about it, before clients hire you, they must make *two decisions*. They decide to change some part of their business (the **Change Decision**), and then they choose you among alternatives to help them make the desired change (the **Service Provider Decision**). If you support the change decision, you will most likely win the service provider decision, so our focus here will be to better understand the former, the change decision.

A change decision is an executive decision that has a major impact on a company. It is a decision to abandon current practices in favor of a new approach; it is a commitment to a new strategy, process, team, or resource allocation.

Change decisions are caused when business plans and objectives meet the reality of a continuously changing market. Changing conditions such as new information, new competitors, changes in demand, technology advances, or legal challenges throw existing plans and methods out of sync, threatening the success of the organization.

The service provider decision is the choice among alternative providers that will help make the change. Without the change decision, the prospect has no need to make a service provider decision. Companies don't choose an integration consultant until they decide to integrate their computer and software systems. They don't need an attorney until they decide to take legal action. They don't need an architect until they decide to build a building.

You are not only asking companies to choose *you*; you are first asking them to choose *change*. You are inviting them to make a decision to transform. To build strategic empathy let's look at the dynamics that drive the change decision.

Understanding Change MVP: Motivation, Vision and Path to Resolution

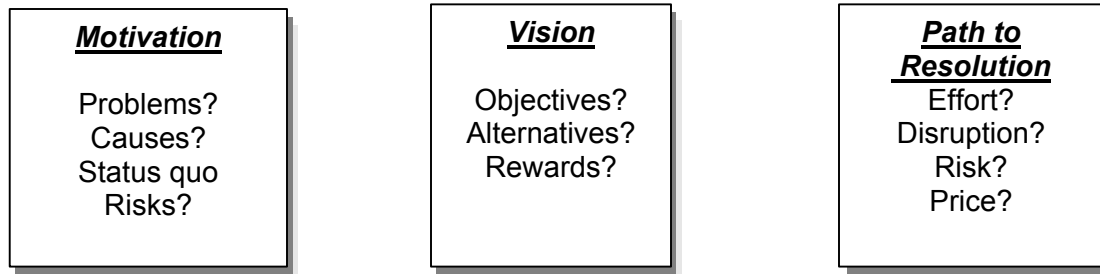
All transformation decisions have three components: 1) a **motivation** to leave current practices, 2) a **vision** of better future state, and 3) a reliable **path** to achieve the vision. I refer to these three components as **Change MVP**. If one component is missing or

undeveloped, the decision will slow or not proceed at all. To the extent that any stakeholder in the decision doesn't share and support MVP, friction develops in the form of resistance to the decision.

Conversely, when you help potential clients recognize and assess risk, evaluate market threats and opportunities and envision a better alternative, you build trust and common purpose. This, in turn, increases a prospect's motivation to make the transformation and reduces resistance to it.

The more you know about your client's motivation, vision and path, the more likely you are to position your service, strategy and message in a way that builds value and preference in the mind of the client.

Change MVP



As the perceived threat of continuing on the same path (status quo risk) increases, so does the *motivation* to find an alternative path. Even motivated prospects won't make a change decision unless a better alternative is visible and attainable.

Vision of a better future becomes more compelling with clarity, consensus and certainty of outcome. Clarity adds definition; consensus creates ownership; and certainty reduces risk. The *Path to Resolution* is the company's clear and reliable way to achieve its vision within its means. The path to resolution is where prospects will encounter the most pain during the change process so it is usually where you will confront the most resistance to your solution.

Purpose Minus Pain = Value

Change decisions are motivated by market changes that create status quo risk. That is, current methods are no longer sustainable. They gain momentum as alternative visions become clear and attractive. That is the growing realization that there is a better way. To proceed, they require a reliable path to deliver the client from the current status quo risk to the future vision reward. That path will usually require the help of a service provider. That is where you come in.

When motivation to change is bolstered by the attraction of a shared vision, it builds purpose; such strength of purpose makes the pain (effort, cost, disruption and risk) of change tolerable. When a potential client possesses both purpose and ability to act, the prospect is then ready for change. Therefore, your role as a service provider is to increase motivation and vision attraction and decrease the pain of your path toward a solution.

Take a minute and put yourself mentally and emotionally in your prospective client's shoes. What changes have occurred in your prospective client's company or market?

What problems have those changes created that you can help fix? What will happen if these obstacles are not addressed? In other words what is the risk of continuing with the status quo.

Are you able to help potential clients envision a better future? How can you help them see and buy into that vision? How can you build confidence that the vision can be achieved? What is the client's perception of the effort, cost and risk of your solution? Can you demonstrate that it is easier, more cost effective and less risky than alternatives? The more a prospect can see, feel and believe in the alternative vision, the easier it is for them to let go of the status quo.

Use strategic empathy to create your own unique selling response that parallels your potential client's purpose and situation. That will lead to faster decisions and more successful engagements. Successful engagements create delighted clients, and delighted clients willingly become your surrogate sales force. They give you more follow-on business and refer you to new prospects. You will spend less time selling and more time helping your clients achieve their objectives.

Robert A. Potter is the author of Winning in the Invisible Market: A Guide to Selling Professional Services in Turbulent Times, which will be published this summer. He is also the managing principal of RA Potter Advisors, a marketing and sales strategy consulting practice for service providers. You can reach him at bpotter@rapotter.com or (415) 459-4888.