

Becoming a trusted advisor

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In these tough economic times where change is a constant and there is increased competition from both local businesses and online suppliers there is a need to be closer to our clients; to be seen as the first port of call when they have a problem, in short to become a trusted advisor. To do this we must establish a trust-based relationship with our client and be viewed as a source of valuable advice. This is where the advisor places a higher value on maintaining and preserving the relationship itself than on the outcome of the current transaction.

In today's climate it is no longer sufficient to simply be the expert; we have to be able to *demonstrate* that we are concerned about our client and their animals, farm and pets. So we need to be competent and credible to ensure that we give good advice, but also have relationship skills to engender trust. This usually requires a whole new set of skills and attributes from the ones which were so important through our technical training.

The key principles of building relationships with our clients are not so different to the ones we employ in a romantic relationship! It can involve the risk of rejection, of accepting that we may not always be right and sometimes you may feel incompetent, (but then nobody likes a 'know-it-all'), and it means that you can never take the other party for granted. You will need to keep *demonstrating* that you are interested in the other party; never assume that they will want to hear advice. After all, how many of us want to listen to our loved ones' voice of reason all the time, even though we know they're probably right?

In any long term relationship we need to demonstrate that we care and that we are worthy of the other party's trust – but how do we do that? Here are some of the key factors:

- Be honest and have the courage to speak up about what we believe will work and what won't. We need to say what we mean in an appropriate manner which isn't always easy if our message isn't what our client wants to hear.
- Be proactive. This means contacting them before they ring you; anticipating their needs, using proactive medicine rather than remedial.
- Always listen first (ALF). Listening to the client to ensure that we understand not only their problem, but how it affects them.
- Once we've earned the right to offer advice, we can demonstrate our competence. You'll know you've jumped the gun if they seem unwilling to listen, and it won't matter that you're right.

Trust takes time to build but we can help it grow through being aware of the behaviours and actions which help to build or destroy that trust.

Our clients need to be able to trust that our intention is based on mutual gain, not just a personal 'win'. Everything we do and say has to reinforce that intention.

Invest time trying to understand your client; what makes them tick and what interests them. Recognise what's important to them so that you can learn to value that also.

Be reliable and keep your promises. Never make a promise that you can't keep, so be careful about making commitments which are outside your control.

A trusted advisor is 'a practitioner who has earned the right to be exceptionally influential' (web definition). Let's start earning that right.