



# I'll tell you what I want. what I really, really want...

Understand how your clients make decisions to create a competitive edge. **By Andrew Hedley**

**T**he return of the Spice Girls and their *Wannabe* anthem offers a timely reminder to professional services marketers of the requirement to understand and deliver the needs of their clients. This is best achieved by listening instead of telling and by acting on the basis of a deep understanding rather than a range of self-serving suppositions.

An area that is still clouded in mystique for many lawyers is how clients go about making decisions about which firm to use for a particular matter.

However, the theory is clear and provides excellent guidance into the ways in which complex decisions are made together with the psychology that is at play in the mind of the individual decision maker.

Taking the organisational context first, understanding the role and dynamics of the decision-making group (DMG) is a fundamental marketing concept.

In practice, very few firms use this simple framework to explore decision making within their target clients – building relationship maps and to creating sales plans that focus on things that really make a difference at clients' touch-points.

Without a simple but systematic approach to understanding these processes it is all but certain that resources will not be deployed to maximum effect, reducing the firm's impact when it comes to influencing the DMG.

It is also crucial to understand the perceptions, thought-processes, criteria and concerns of each individual decision maker.

The sophisticated client will have a well considered perception of all potential suppliers. It is important that these are understood. Some perceptions may be

objectively correct and accepted by the firm whilst others may be objectively correct and not accepted by the firm (in these cases external research combined with direct client feedback can be crucial in bridging this perception gap).

There will also be gaps resulting from clients having either a historic view of the business or one that has been formed by a singular and unrepresentative experience. These views fall into what may be termed the objectively incorrect category – some may be to the firm's benefit while others will be to its detriment.

An analysis of these four categories of perception is very instructive in giving insights for action. It highlights areas where increased communication may be necessary to correct misconceptions as well as showing the most important areas to focus on in closing gaps between external and internal perceptions.

It is clear that, without understanding the current position, it is very difficult to effectively move perceptions to a point which represents a more positive, up-to-date view of the firm.

'How do we get an understanding of the ways in which our clients make decisions and how they regard us on these make-or-break dimensions?' is a question that is often posed. The question is also often caveated with a need to move quickly, a lack of available budget, an inherent cynicism that anything new will be uncovered and a requirement to keep things as simple as possible. What are the ways in which this issue can be pragmatically approached?

There is a valuable, indeed crucial role, for externally-commissioned research into

buying habits. However for many firms, or departments within them, the cost may appear prohibitive. Lower cost syndicated research studies and information in the public domain provide the broad indicators of the key dimensions but the devil lies in the detail when seeking to understand the nuances of a particular client or sector.

Firms of all sizes can address this quite straightforwardly by, dare I say it, speaking to their clients about the way in which they go about deciding who to use.

A focused conversation, using a structured discussion guide, which explores options and employs good listening skills, will often elicit gold-nuggets of knowledge. For many lawyers, there is a natural reticence to enter into such conversations coupled with a reluctance to allow their marketing professionals to do so on their behalf.

Lack of maturity in this area means that opportunities go begging and success rates are compromised yet a simple and effective solution is within the grasp of all firms! Speak with clients in a focused way and ask about the things that matter to them!

Of course such an approach has the added benefit of demonstrating interest to a client; the research is clear that this is one of the key issues on which clients need reassurance, meeting the maxim of 'I don't care what you know until I know you care about me'.

As the Spice Girls would say, "Now don't go wasting my precious time, Get your act together we could be just fine." ■

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