

Keeping the Fire Burning After the Torch is Passed
Retaining Clients When the Rainmaker Leaves

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Introduction

Professional service firms win work when prospects trust them to solve their problems. “Trust” is the cornerstone of winning work and retaining clients. For most purchasers of professional services, trust begins with the key person (rainmaker) who really cares about the client’s problem and can orchestrate a solution. Relationship-based selling is the single most powerful method of securing new clients and keeping existing ones. People don’t care how much you (or your firm) know until they know how much you (and your firm) care. It is a person-to-person business.

Relationship-based issues account for 70 percent of the total impact for winning work, according to Lore International Institute research. The role of the rainmaker in establishing faith and maintaining communications and trust is critical in the process of winning work.

Opening Impact on winning 20%	Middle Impact on winning 70%	Closing Impact on winning 10%
Get to know the Market	Get to know the Client	Get to know the Deal
Market Analysis	Client Management	Proposal Management
Client Planning	Relationship Management ▫ Information Management ▫ Perception Management	Presentation
Strategic Planning	Opportunity Management ▫ Pursuit Management ▫ Capture Management	Negotiations
Business Planning		Contracting
Branding		

“Achieving the transition from opportunity selling to behaviorally differentiated customer relationships leads to time share, mind share, wallet share, and market share - resulting in winning more than your share.”

*Lore International Institute,
 Durango, Colorado, from a white paper entitled “Winning More Than Your Share.”*

This model is presented in the Lore International Institute white paper “The Business Development Audit: A Power Tool for Building Competitive Advantage.”

What actions do firms take to successfully retain clients when a rainmaker seller leaves?

Best practices research.

This is a descriptive study; not a statistical analysis. The purpose of the research was to identify the best practices of firms that successfully retained clients upon the departure of the key person who maintained client relationships.

“He had been working for his new firm for over a month while still on our payroll.

He was transferring the client relationship to his new organization before anyone in our shop knew he was leaving.”

East Coast Architectural Firm CEO

Why is the study important?

- Firms need to know how to protect their most valued assets - their relationship with clients.
- Firms need proven methods to transition clients from one rainmaker to another if conditions warrant it.

Who participated?

Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) members with senior level management titles were identified. Professional Services Marketing Association (PMSA) members were also identified for the study. Both groups were encouraged to complete a brief pre-qualification paper and pencil, or on-line survey. In exchange for completing the pre-qualification survey, a copy of the research findings summary was promised.

An in-depth phone or face-to-face interview was conducted with the pre-qualified firm representatives. To qualify for an interview, the firm had to have each of the following conditions:

- One or more rainmakers who left the employment of the firm in the past three years.
- Success in keeping, for six or more months, some or all of the departing rainmaker’s clients.

The selected interviewees came from a representative cross section of firms based upon geography, size of firm, services offered, and selling platform (full-time sellers, doer-sellers, or both).

What were the research questions?

The study focused on three questions:

- What actions do firms take to successfully retain clients when a key employee with an established relationship (rainmaker) leaves with advance notice? (i.e. involuntary termination, planned retirement, or resignation with advance notice.)

Participant firms by types of services offered

Architectural.....9%
Engineering.....33%
Architectural/Engineering...15%
Engineering/Architectural...15%
Environmental.....4%
Construction.....15%
Other.....9%

Participant firms by selling platform

Doer-seller.....52%
Full time sellers.....24%
Both.....24%

“Six months after I left, the firm went belly-up. The bankruptcy petition noted a driving reason for the downturn of the firm was the unexpected resignation of the west coast office rainmaker--- namely me.

I gave them 30 days notice. They never did anything with the clients when I left...nothing.”

Senior National SMPS Leader

“The departing seller and replacing seller met face-to-face with each client. They tried to focus the meeting on the positive energy of the firm in providing seamless service.

Usually a senior executive would also attend this relationship transfer meeting.

There was enhanced communications during the first few months of the transition.

Because of the problem of rainmakers leaving the firm, the organization is seeking more employees within the firm who can have a relationship with the client organization.”

*Vice President-East Coast
Specialty Consulting
Engineering Firm*

- What actions do firms take to successfully retain clients when a key employee with an established relationship (rainmaker) leaves without notice or with very short notice?
- Is there a difference in successful client retention when the rainmaker is a “doer-seller” versus a full-time seller?

Findings

The methods successful firms use to retain clients are largely the same regardless of the amount of advance notice of a rainmaker’s departure. There was no difference in successful client retention between “doer-seller” versus “full-time seller” platforms. Most firms used many or all of these retention actions:

- Immediate contact by a senior executive of the firm.
- Personal, honest communications with the client by a senior firm executive. The executive must explain the departure (or planned departure) of the rainmaker.
- Face-to-face meeting whenever possible.
- Quick identification and introduction of the rainmaker replacement (by the departing rainmaker, if appropriate).
- Frequent communications (phone, e-mail, face-to-face) during the early stages of the transition by the firm’s executives and the new rainmaker.
- Enhanced and more frequent communications during the relationship transition period.

Recommendations

Personal, honest, and sustained relationships build trust. The rainmaker is the person who develops and nurtures a relationship with a prospect. He or she transforms the prospect into a client and sustains a professional relationship to capture more work.

There is consensus. There is evidence of best practices for firms seeking client retention when a rainmaker leaves. The triage actions are clear, simple, and very time consuming.

- **Urgency** - as soon as possible communicate with your clients. Let them know a transition is in process. There is home court advantage hearing the transition story from senior management instead of the departing rainmaker, or rumors on the street.

(Word of mouth works for you and works against you. There are few communication systems faster.)

“We kept in constant contact with these clients and also our former seller’s prospects.

The contact must be immediate, face-to-face and must involve our most senior people. We know we must re-establish the trust right away.

We do plenty of follow up and phone work after the transitioning meeting. And, yes, the former seller contacted our clients on behalf of his new organization almost immediately.”

*President, Midwestern
Architectural Firm*

- **Big guns** - senior level management/principals must take a proactive role in communicating with the clients. In lieu of personal trust, senior management level commitment is demanded.
- **Personal** - keep the message positive, simple, and personal. “Henry was a fine fellow. You will enjoy working with your new Client Service Manager, Rachel. Our firm will provide seamless service as usual. I personally want to make this transition successful. Call me at any time.”
- **Transition** - identify a replacement rainmaker as soon as possible. Senior level management should introduce the new rainmaker, when it is not possible or appropriate for the exiting rainmaker to do so. Many firms build redundancy into the relationship, with two or more persons from the firm knowing the client.
- **Re-sell/re-commit** - review why your firm was selected and reiterate those features and benefits to the client organization. Communicate this message several times.
- **Nurture** - nurture the new client/rainmaker relationship with frequent contacts/communications.
- **Honesty** - be honest with clients, your firm, and yourself. Your competition will be intense during this transition. Established professional friendships are powerful. It will take time and energy to keep your client.
- **CRM** - mandate the use of a consistent client relationship management data depot. Readily available information and clear understanding of the client organization, needs, and operations will allow for better, faster, and more successful client relationship transitions.

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