

THE RELATIONSHIP ADVANTAGE: BECOME A TRUSTED ADVISOR AND CREATE CLIENTS FOR LIFE

By Sam Barcus and Tom Stevenson

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In *The Relationship Advantage*, Sam Barcus and Tom Stevenson reveal the secrets of how partners in consulting firms establish and sustain long-term trusted relationships with senior client executives. Their premise is that this model will transcend a variety of cultures and will work for executives and managers in sales organizations who want to build similar relationships with client executives. The authors make it clear, however, that initiating and developing this type of relationship can't typically be delegated to new or inexperienced sales professionals; rather, it must be initiated by senior company executives themselves.

Strategic account professionals will find this book useful because it shares consulting-based best practices for finding opportunities, winning business and retaining key clients. The focus of the book is on the value of creating a relationship-oriented business culture and the resulting impact on overall profitability.

A clear differentiation is made early in the book regarding the definitions of the terms *customer* and *client*, with significant implications. The authors define the primary task in developing a relationship with a *customer* as selling a product already made and the primary job in developing a relationship with a *client* as serving his or her needs, which may mean that the product will ultimately be included in a customized solution offered to the client.

The authors also point out that executives from supplier and customer organizations who participate in business deals typically wait to meet each other until the deal is won or lost. However, partners

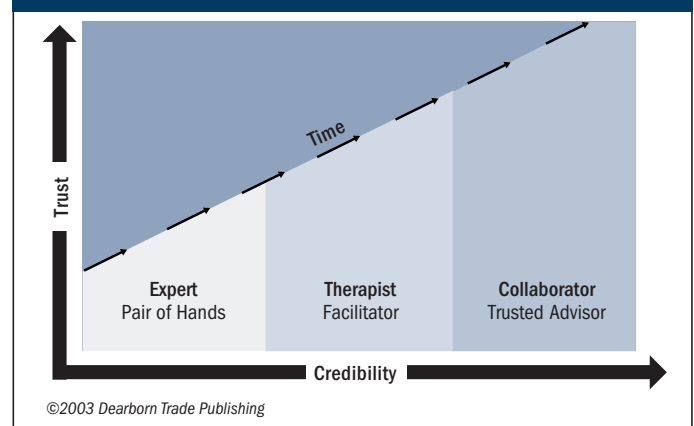
in consulting firms engage their client executives at the "first strike," which is typically well before the decision-making process for major purchases has even started! The obvious implication is that the models used by consultant partners are unmistakably client-centered.

Practical, street-level approaches to developing these high-level relationships are outlined and successes cited. Ideas for building these types of relationships include executive sponsorship programs, executive briefings and Strategic Account programs, all designed to enable the creation of peer-level match-ups. They point out that these types of programs are frequently implemented as part of a strategic accounts initiative; the authors cite the need, however, for the ownership of these programs to be at the highest levels of the organization if they are to be successful. In addition, the success of these programs is dependent on a combination of measurement, motivation and compensation models being put in place and continually monitored.

We've all heard the term "rainmaker." *The Relationship Advantage* takes this term to a new level, revealing a process model for executing on the various aspects of building a client relationship. The tactical execution of that model focuses on two key elements:

- Understanding the client's situation thoroughly, including the way the client thinks and how the client approaches key business issues; and

The Influence Model




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- Using each contact with the client as an opportunity to let the client see how the rainmaker works and thinks.

The evolution of a trusted relationship is shown in the figure above, which is extracted from the text. Obviously, the goal of a rainmaker is to develop that collaborative relationship with client executives, meaning that they begin to work interdependently with them, sharing both successes and failures.

Practical tips, as well as a variety of tools, are presented throughout the book and the reader will pick up pointers on several key topics that are relevant to establishing lasting relationships with client executives. For example, the concept of a diagnostic compass is presented that plainly indicates the direction to take and the approach to use with respect to conducting an initial meeting with a client executive. This tool alone is worth the price of the book!

The Relationship Advantage is a quick and engaging read that shares consulting-based best practices for finding opportunities, winning business and keeping clients. It is particularly well suited for strategic account professionals interested in learning how to develop trusted advisor relationships at the highest levels in client organizations. 

Steve Bistriz is president of Learning Solutions International, a sales training and consulting firm based in Atlanta.