

From the prospect's viewpoint

For over 10 years, I was head of corporate market research for a large multinational firm, and during that time I was a prospect for many market research firms. Their sales reps would often phone me and open with this line: "I am planning to be in your area next Wednesday, and it would be convenient for me to stop by and see you then. What time is good for you?" There are many things wrong with this opener. 1) The sales rep was putting his/her convenience first and the prospective buyer's convenience second. 2) The sales rep did not bother to find out how the vendor decision process at my company worked. 3) The sales rep did not bother to find out what kind of research I was conducting or might be interested in for the future.

On a good day, I might get a phone call from a sales rep who would spend the time to inquire about my needs. When I had the time, I would respond in great detail. Unfortunately, my hopes for a useful response were dashed when the follow-up I received was a form letter and a four-color brochure positioning the research vendor as a full-service firm and saying absolutely nothing about how their services would meet my specific needs. The brochure went into a file marked "Full-Service Market Research Firms" and wasn't looked at again.

Research vendors often inquired whether I had an RFP coming out soon that they could bid on. That sales method may work for some companies, but for me it was not the right question. My process was to review new firms to learn about their capabilities in advance. When it was time for an RFP, I would have already decided on which firms were qualified to bid on that particular project.

How market research vendors can increase sales to the corporate research buyer

Helped drive decisions

In addition to choosing research vendors for corporate projects, my responsibilities included recommending research vendors to our other divisions and subsidiaries for their own research projects. I created a corporate database of all market research vendors that any researcher had used either in our current jobs or in previous jobs,

along with ratings and comments. The database eventually helped drive decisions. Over time, the research firms that got the most satisfactory ratings were used over and over again, while those that were considered unsatisfactory were never used again.

The lesson for market research vendors is that client satisfaction is your No. 1 selling tool in a corporate environment. First, find out how



By Bonnie Eisenfeld

Editor's note: Bonnie Eisenfeld is a Philadelphia-based independent marketing research consultant. She can be reached at 215-567-1635 or at bwehrl@earthlink.net.

the corporation perceives your work. Second, keep up the quality level of your work. Third, cross-sell based on satisfaction. If the corporation does not have a database of vendors, the research vendor can do its own client satisfaction research. If the vendor gets high marks, the sales rep should use that information to pitch other researchers within the same corporation. If the research firm gets low marks, its management needs to do some serious diagnostics and take prompt corrective action.

As a research buyer, my criteria were quality, timeliness and price, in that order. I learned from experience that no one thanked me for getting a project done cheaply if it was poor-quality or late. There is a trend in corporations toward vendor management as a function within purchasing. The object of this function is to get prices lowered, so it is the research buyer's job to maintain the quality through user ratings and avoid asking low-rated firms to bid on projects.

If a research buyer needs a particular type of research and does not know which firms are best in that area, he or she will often contact other research colleagues for recommendations. For example, if I wanted to conduct research in a foreign country, I might contact research colleagues in firms who deal in that country to get recommendations. Client satisfaction is the driver of those recommendations.

Differentiate yourself

Research vendors who specialize in methodology or subject or target populations often have an advantage over full-service vendors. If you are a full-service vendor, you can differentiate yourself by developing some specialties and targeting buyers who are interested in those specialties. Specialization is one way a research vendor can break into a corporation that has not done business with that firm before. From time to time, a new subject or a new methodology will be needed and the research buyer will want to be able to look up firms in that specialty.

A couple of times when I invited a sales rep from a new research firm in for a visit, I expected us to chat about

my needs and their services and how they intersected. Instead, the sales rep showed up with a presentation book and proceeded to go through it systematically. My secretary would later tell me that I looked like I was in pain.

My advice is to take advantage of the opportunity to identify the buyer's needs and not try to tell your whole story in one sitting. You can send thoughtful follow-up information later. A well-written letter discussing how your firm's services matched my needs would be much more effective than an expensive brochure.

Comfort level

Large research firms with well-known names were often requested by top management because the name provides a certain comfort level. Also, a larger firm might be needed for a large project that a smaller boutique can't handle. But research directors know that size and name are no guarantee of satisfaction. In my experience, I got to deal with more qualified researchers at smaller firms.

Relationships with project directors at research firms are also important drivers of satisfaction. The research buyer depends on the project director to ensure quality and timeliness. Changes in personnel alter the relationship and are cause for reevaluation. In some cases, I wanted to follow the project director to his or her new firm because I trusted that person to bring quality to my project.

Entertainment of prospects

In the "good old days" of three-martini lunches and golf, entertainment of prospects was the norm. In the current world of work/life balance and flextime schedules, professionals want to make the most efficient use of their work time and then use their leisure time for themselves and their families.

Vendor-sponsored events that include informational and educational content, such as interesting speakers or demonstrations of new methodologies, are often well-received. New, useful information is a valuable commodity and, combined with lunch, is often an attractor that will get a prospect out of the office. An expert from a research firm has the opportunity to communicate his or her specialized

knowledge and enhance the firm's image with an audience of current and prospective research buyers.

To supplement these educational efforts, a research firm can also provide written educational content on its Web site and in mailings, such as case studies or unique methodology information, along with credentials of principals and staffers, client list and other details about the firm.

E-mails or letters that are strictly promotional are not informative and will usually be deleted or discarded. On the other hand, if you establish a pattern of sending useful communications, your clients and prospects will look forward to reading them. When a research buyer is looking for a new research vendor, your name will already be implanted in his/her brain.

Holiday gifts

Many vendors send holiday gifts to research buyers. I am sure they do not think research buyers make vendor choices based on gifts they receive. The purpose of gifts is to serve as a reminder of the vendor to the buyer, hopefully a daily reminder that sits right on the buyer's desk. The problem is, how many mugs and calendars can one person use? If a vendor is going to send a gift, it should be unique and useful. A thoughtful gift is appreciated and remembered, but gifts are not really influential in making vendor choices.

Many vendors send holiday food gifts, which are lots of fun to receive, up to a saturation point. The most memorable food gift I received was a cheesecake at Thanksgiving. It was delicious and no other gifts came at that time and I could share it with my staff. Did it influence my purchase decision? No.

Understand the client's view

Ideally, researchers who work at vendor firms should have some experience on the client side so they can understand the client's view. Even without that experience, if you are a good researcher, you should be able to ask the right questions. Instead of providing an aerial map of your firm and its services, get in the client's seat and look out of the client's windshield to see the road, the signs, the traffic and the destination the way the client sees them. | Q