
What Makes Great Client Service?

I was interviewing a candidate for an entry-level assistant account executive's position. She was fresh out of college; her work experience was limited to summer jobs and internships, but she was smart, aggressive, funny, and self-confident. For some reason that eluded me, she wanted to be an account person. I figured I might be working for her in 10 years.

After questioning this promising young person about everything from why she chose to study history in college to what she was currently reading, I asked if she had any questions for me. She replied, "I have only one." I figured she would ask me about the agency's goals, how I became such a self-important success, or something else grand and sweeping of that nature. But she surprised me.

"What makes a great account person?" she asked.

Simple question. Complicated answer. If you put this to 100 people in advertising, you would get 100 different answers. Here's what I told her:

It's more about skills and qualities than about education and experience. A degree in literature or philosophy might be more valuable than an MBA. Tending bar will teach you more than will working in a company that has no clue about collaboration or client service.

It used to be that agencies would train their account people extensively. These days that's increasingly rare. The training is shorter and less complete, and fewer agencies invest in it. But that doesn't place a set of handcuffs on you. Just because agencies don't teach doesn't mean you can't learn. You simply have to take greater responsibility for your own on-the-job training. Agencies offer plenty of opportunity for that, if you're willing to invest the time and effort. It might be between midnight and 8:00 A.M.; it might be on Saturday and Sunday. If you want to learn, that's just what it might take.

Speaking of nights and weekends, new business is one of the best places to learn. In new business, the agency moves at warp speed, ideas are rocket fuel, and some of the agency's smartest and most senior people inevitably are assigned to work on the pitch. Volunteer to help. You'll have to work nights and weekends on top of the nights and weekends you're already working. All you might get to do is fold, collate, and staple, but you will also get to observe. You will get to interact with senior people. You'll get to see them tackle a tough marketing challenge and how they solve it. If you're lucky, you'll get to participate in some small way in helping the agency win. You'll feel some of the heat that gets generated by one of these things.

*Now what about skills? Communication is at the top of the list, both written and oral. You've got to be good on paper. An agency might teach you to write a conference report, a creative brief, a point-of-view letter, a strategy deck, or at least show you examples that you can use as "go-bys." What the agency won't teach, shouldn't have to teach, is concision and clarity, style and organization. These you must develop yourself. Start by reading William Strunk and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style* and William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*. Follow what they say and, no matter how good (or bad) your writing is, it will get better.*

You also have to be good on your feet—in meetings, on the phone, in presentations, over dinner, or wherever else you connect with clients and colleagues. You can learn to be a competent presenter at an agency; you'll probably have the chance to present to your colleagues and your boss, if not your clients. If you work at it, if you practice, if you have an instinct for it, you just might become good enough to bring tears to the eyes of your audience.

No one is going to teach you to be good in the moment, to know what to say and just how to say it. No one is going to teach you what not to say, and when it's smart to hold your tongue.

Communicating isn't just about what you say; it's about listening and really hearing what the other person says. It's about the ability to interpret the subtext, not just the text, of any communication.

When it comes to skills, communication is the one every account executive must master.

There is one other skill that separates good account people from great account people: the ability to generate ideas. Many good account people have great integrity and solid judgment. They are masters of their discipline, communicate well, are good with clients, supportive of colleagues, and excellent at process. They may rise to very senior levels in their agencies, even to CEO. But if they are not idea generators, they fall short of being great.

Ideas are the blood and bone of advertising and marketing. Any competent agency can make an ad, but great agencies make ads fueled by invention, driven by ideas. Likewise, any competent account person can run a piece of business, but great account people can grow a piece of business by bringing ideas to clients that solve problems and capitalize on opportunities.

There are other things that matter—good quantitative and analytical capabilities, an orientation to organization and detail—but nothing matters more than the ability to communicate well and the ability to generate ideas. Ideas, and the ability to communicate them effectively, distinguish great account people from those who are merely good.

When it comes to qualities, there are two that stand above all others: integrity and judgment.

Integrity has always been an essential quality of the best account people; it is key to building trust with clients and colleagues. Judgment

is key to arriving at the right decision when the circumstances are less than completely clear.

Account people need integrity and judgment in abundance to navigate what are increasingly complex issues and relationships that characterize the advertising and marketing communications business. The high-integrity account person takes ownership of problems. The high-judgment account person has the ability to resolve them fairly for all parties.

Great account people embody other qualities: patience, discipline, grace under pressure, a sense of humor, meticulousness, a sense of ownership, a spirit of collaboration, self-effacement, a sense of context, a service orientation. All of these are incredibly important.

Without patience, you have no hope of dealing with difficult clients and wayward colleagues.

Without discipline, you will never be able to focus on the task at hand.

Without grace under pressure, you will crumble under pressure. There is pressure in our business. At times it is intense.

Without a sense of humor, you will be unable to see that what we do is not brain surgery, and that we are not looking for a cure for cancer. We do advertising; it's critically important to our clients, but it is not a life-or-death matter.

Without meticulousness, you will make mistakes, and not catch the mistakes of others. An accumulation of small errors can undermine a client relationship.

Without a sense of ownership, you will not take full responsibility for delivering for your clients, and you will not step up when things go wrong. Your colleagues won't respect you, and your clients won't trust you.

Without a spirit of collaboration, you will be unable to marshal the full resources of the agency to the benefit of the client.

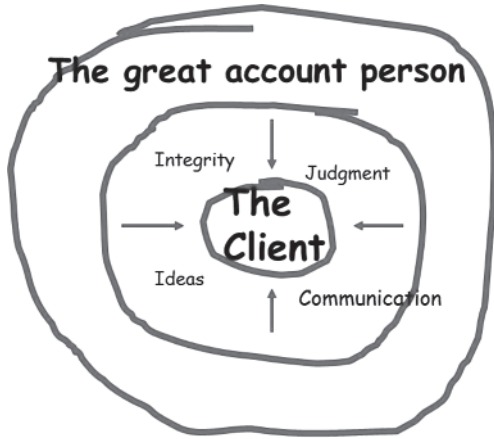
Without self-effacement, you will be dissatisfied with the lack of recognition account people receive.

Without a sense of context, you will see the details but not the larger purpose they serve.

Without a service orientation, you have no hope of helping your colleagues and clients achieve their goals.

With that, I paused. I wondered if the candidate sitting across from me was sorry she asked. No question I got a little carried away with my answer, but she seemed to still be with me. She was a good listener, and she was patient.

I concluded my monologue by saying that if I were to reduce this to four guiding principles, they would be integrity, judgment, communication, and ideas. Then I grabbed a piece of paper and drew this sketch:



“Does any of this make sense?” I asked.

“All of it,” she replied. “Maybe I should be a copywriter.”

I laughed. But she must have heard me, because today she holds a very senior, global role in an agency.

