

The Business of Relationships

I work as a freelance copywriter. Before this, I spent a number of years working in the IT industry, in partnership marketing roles. Somewhere along the way I also managed to get married, have a son and then get divorced, which wasn't quite what I had planned when I walked up the aisle! At that time, I enthusiastically embarked upon a journey that I genuinely believed would last a lifetime.

As I thought about this, and about the challenges of the industry I work in, I came to the conclusion that there are a significant number of similarities between business partnerships and personal relationships! It's uncomfortable to compare the two, but if we do, I believe that couples who are thinking about marriage or a long-term relationship might just improve their chances of success . . .

Everyone talks about alliances and partnerships in the IT industry. All companies will collaborate with other companies to enhance the services that they can provide to their customers. Hardware and software, networks and phone systems, any area of the business where a partnership will ultimately benefit both companies and enable them to be more successful.

When setting up a partnership relationship there is a process to go through to ensure that both companies will benefit from the arrangement, and part of this process involves asking a number of key questions, like these:

- What do I want from this partnership?
- What can I bring to the table?
- What do I expect my partner to provide to me?
- What are my partner's expectations of me, and of how I will conduct this relationship?
- What are our joint goals and targets?
- How do we decide if it's working?
- How do we define whether the relationship is successful or not?
- How do we decide if all is not well - and what do we do to put it right?

Sounds familiar?

There's also another angle on this. In the past I have worked as a freelance marketing manager, providing services for my clients. To achieve this I worked with a number of suppliers who provided the different elements of an overall campaign.

When I set up a new client/supplier relationship, we formally agreed on what the supplier would provide and on what I required from them. We then put 'service level agreements' in place, and

assessed the relationship on an ongoing basis, to ensure that the agreements we made at the start were being kept to. Which is good business sense, nothing more.

Then you have relationships . . .

Relationships are a 'coming together' of two parties for the benefit of both. A relationship is meant to enhance and improve the life of each individual. To provide something which was previously not there, and to create something which is of more value than the sum of its parts.

Now let's look at those questions again . . .

- What do I want from this partnership?
- What can I bring to the table?
- What do I expect my partner to provide to me?
- What are my partner's expectations of me - and of how I will conduct this relationship?
- What are our joint goals and targets?
- How do we decide if it's working?
- How do we define whether the relationship is successful or not?
- How do we decide if all is not well - and what do we do to put it right?

How many people, when launching into a new relationship, ask any of these questions? And if we did, would we be branded cold, heartless and calculating? Of course we would!

And yet, in a business environment, how many of us would agree to a partnership or a client/supplier relationship that looked something like this:

"On Day One of this formal agreement I will make lots of promises which I fully intend to keep, but after that you will just have to trust me that I will do so."

"I think I know what I want from this relationship, but hey, my needs will change along the way, as will yours, so who knows for sure?"

"If I am not happy, or I feel that there is something lacking in the relationship, I might tell you. Or I might just bottle a few things up and then throw them all at you in one go when I've had a bad day, even though half of them are not your fault."

"One day I might decide that I want something totally different and even though I made all those promises, I can always change my mind can't I?"

What business arrangement, if made on these grounds, would last five minutes? None that I know of.

Imagine setting up a client/supplier relationship that goes something like this:

"I hereby confirm that I will provide the services and support which I have verbally agreed to, for as long as it suits me, on the understanding that this contract is binding for life and that you will agree to this based on my word alone. There will be no annual review, no assessment of my performance at regular intervals and no option for you to re-negotiate the agreement if I fail to perform as promised."

When I walked up the aisle all those years ago I really thought it was easy. I didn't think for a moment that I might change, that I might want different things further down the line, and that eventually I would not want the partnership I had agreed to at all. I also naively assumed that the partner I had chosen would not change, or want different things, either.

It seems to me that our hope lies in communication. A clear understanding from the outset that we will both work towards a common goal and that we will take steps along the way to help us make that happen. If people were prepared to take a slightly more 'businesslike' view on relationships, I genuinely believe that a few more at least, might survive longer.

Cold, hard, calculating?

Probably.

Realistic?

Definitely!

Gill Taylor

www.freelancecopywriting.biz